

## The Supreme Task of the Social Studies

Earl S. Johnson

MAN lives at the crossroads where the material and the spiritual intersect and interact. The name for this meeting place is the social where the human adventure, or call it the struggle for civilization, is enacted. To interpret and illuminate this struggle is the supreme task of the social studies. If they fail at it, the two cultures about which Sir Charles Snow writes<sup>1</sup> will continue to stand apart and thus continue to threaten the outcome of that struggle.

Grant me now the privilege of offering a set of metaphors which have helped me better to understand the essence of the realms of the spiritual, the social and the material. To the realm of the spiritual, I give the name *poetics*; to that of the social, the name *politics*; and to the material, the name *physics*.

By the term *poetics* I refer to the myths by which men in every society live but which in being myths are not untruths, rather those things upon which they set their hearts and minds and whose endless pursuit gives purpose and direction to their lives. They are fact-by-faith rather than by empirical proof, or what John R. Seeley calls *fidefacts*.<sup>2</sup> They are such as these: dignity, beauty,

and truth; philosophies and ideologies, legal systems and codes, theories and theologies, and political ideals among which is democracy itself which is not something that is, but something which men believe ought to be and hence continually becoming.

By physics I refer to all the material artifacts which man has made out of the potentials of nature: tools and machines of all kinds, foods processed from grains and fruits, clothing made from natural and synthetic fibers, books, objects of art, houses, furniture and, perhaps most significant for our era, the forms of power which man has put at his disposal by wringing from a reluctant nature her deepest-laid secret.

By politics—and now you will see why I mention it last—I refer to the consensual process through which men decide what myths they ought to serve and in whose service they will employ the things and forms of power which the realm of physics has made available, as well as their own moral and intellectual resources.

### Task of the School

The media in each realm are persons acting in, through, and by the institutional sets proper to each realm: the church, the family, the forum, the market, the factory, the press, the laboratory, the clinic, the theatre, the library and the school.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Snow. *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1961.

<sup>2</sup> See his chapter, "Mankind as a Fact by Faith," in *Education and the Idea of Mankind*, Robert Ulrich, editor, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World Co., 1964.

In the school we come upon that institution to which falls the unique and highly specialized task for which none of the institutions named is adequately equipped and to none of which society has given the mandate it has given the school. This is to show the degree to which the school's teachings come to a common point of focus, and in whatever degree they fail to come to it. That point of focus is the realm of the social where the realms of the spiritual and material intersect and interact. It is in this view that I believe the social studies inherit the philosophic task of the school. This is to fashion out of Many, a One.

In a society as complex as ours the aphorism that "life teaches" tells but a half-truth, because its teaching is now so highly segmented as to blur the image of what its teaching really is. I refer here to what each of the institutions named above teaches, and suggest that the teaching of each needs to be related to the teaching of all the others. Such "total" or "entire" teaching is necessary if students are to see life not only "whole" but also "steadily," as Matthew Arnold enjoined.

The many teachings of the several institutions I have named need to be coordinated. The institution to which this task falls in all advanced societies is the school. It is my evangel that within the school the social studies must be the core studies in the role I have ascribed to them, the philosophic. To them, uniquely, falls the task of insuring that the world our students experience will make sense to them because its separate and often separated parts have been brought to a common point of focus in the realm of politics. This is to say that the quality of coherence which individual selves achieve is conditioned by the quality of

cohesion of their worlds through related knowledge about them.<sup>3</sup>

The institutions I have named, and many more unnamed, are the settings within which specialized tasks are performed. Each is, in its own right and setting, a segment of the social realm. Each serves in its peculiar way one or more of the myths of the realm of poetics and likewise draws, as its peculiar needs require, from the resources of the realm of physics. Let me illustrate.

Through the socioeconomic process of the market, men seek to "strike a bargain" between their unlimited wants and their limited resources. Through the more intimate social process of the family that climate is provided within which "those ideas are acquired which lay hold on the roots of character."<sup>4</sup> Through the church, the sacred ancient values are assimilated to the requirements and exigencies of contemporary life and material as well as spiritual needs are ministered to. Through the press, fact and opinion are made accessible to the literate members of a society and employed in various ways in their myriad individual and collective concerns. Through the forum of legislation which represents the political process, par excellence, men arrive, through compromise, at a consensus as to what, in the large, constitutes the good for given communities and what socio-spiritual and material means are necessary for its realization.

Thus, through the ensemble of these and all the other institutions common to modern social systems, their cultures are

*(Continued on page 327)*

<sup>3</sup> See John R. Seeley, "Education, What For?", *School Review*, Winter 1958, for a discussion of the concepts, "coherence" and "cohesion."

<sup>4</sup> See John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, Chicago: Gateway Books, 1946, p. 211.

(Continued from page 292)

organized and sustained. Taken in their totality, they are the forces and forms within which men express and engage those motives "which draw them together and push them apart" and "reveal what is desirable and what is hurtful."<sup>5</sup>

If the social studies are to perform the synthesizing or coordinating function by which the intersection and interaction of the realms of poetics, politics and physics are to be made real, we must ask what modes of knowing they must employ and what universal questions they must shed light upon.

I wish to treat first the universal questions which the social studies must seek to answer if we would turn to them to explore and illuminate the realm of the social where, according to my thesis, the realms of the spiritual and material intersect and interact. They must tell us of the "what and how" of this convergence. This involves description and explanation. They must tell us the "why" which reveals the relation of cause-and-effect. They must also tell us about "what ought," which involves judging and assessing. To excuse the social studies from treating all these universal questions is to assign them less than their proper functions.

The modes of knowing involved in pressing social inquiry along these lines are those which employ fact, logic and imagination. Through fact, what is revealed. By the use of logic, facts are ordered and expressed in general propositions. Imagination is that mode of knowing which enters, creatively, into the modes of both fact and logic through

revealing to us what facts we need in order to make those general propositions which we believe to be most relevant and significant for knowing and improving the human adventure. It is this mode of knowing which man has always used to take him beyond the boundaries of his present facts and beliefs. Its nurture is the greatest challenge and opportunity which the social studies offer.<sup>6</sup>

The thesis which I have presented is meant for the social education of teachers as well as their students, for the quality of their minds and purposes will, if the school is the vital force we covet, be greatly influenced by ours.

—EARL S. JOHNSON, *Emeritus Professor of the Social Sciences, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, and Visiting Professor of Secondary Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.*

---

#### Understanding—Lewis

(Continued from page 309)

obstacles to its use. First, there is a dearth of material suitable for comprehensive studies that is available to schools. Second, most teachers lack confidence to undertake the detailed study of a country. There is a new asset on the educational scene that will help to overcome both of these problems. The first teachers to go overseas in the Teachers for East Africa Project are returning after two years of experience. Similarly, members of the first group of Peace Corps Volunteers are returning; approximately 25 percent of these volunteers plan to continue as teachers. The experience of working for two years in an overseas assignment has provided these teachers with a valuable background of information about the country in which

<sup>6</sup> For a full elaboration of these modes of knowing see Earl S. Johnson, "Ways of Knowing," *Social Education*, January 1963.

<sup>5</sup> See John Dewey, *The School and Society*, Phoenix edition, with *The Child and the Curriculum*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 151.

Copyright © 1965 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.