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John T. Holton

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Review

History: neat and messy

Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636 by Frederick Rudolph, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1977, \$13.95

There are two sorts of history, neat and messy. Neat history has no rough edges. It is the history that is presented in Charleston Heston movies, James Michener novels and introduction to the history of education texts. From neat history we learn, among other things, that the Roman Empire fell because of its moral turpitude, that the American West was settled by lusty men and women, and that although Vittorino da Feltre (1378-1446) "stands as an example of the best-educated worldly and Christian humanist; he had too little knowledge of science to be considered Promethean."¹ It is pleasant history to read because it confirms for us facts we already know. And, as in the last example cited, if we did not know it before, we have a new fact formulated neatly and conveniently packaged for later reference, as well as fact that fits nicely into what we already know. Is it not a given that it was not until the Scientific Revolution that Western man could be truly Promethean? Neat history, in short, is homogenized history. All events and persons can fit into a few pigeonholes and labelled appropriately. Good kings always bring about civic improvements, codify the laws, and balance the exchequer. Bad kings always dissipate themselves, bankrupt the treasury, and predictably die of a surfeit of something.²

Messy history boils over with human activity and with the ambiguous fact. In messy history we find the virtuous Roman huggermugger with the dissolute Roman, the settler of the West who got along with the Native Americans and a Vittorino da Feltre in whose school at Mantua "scientific instruction was thought of as indispensable to a liberal education."³ Messy history does not lend itself to multiple-choice tests because the exceptions are plainly present—both the Victorian and the un-Victorian Victorian may appear in it. Now messy history is not simply a compendium of facts in which chaos reigns. The test of messy history is variety, "... the events and persons of history were each unique, individual, induplicable, different from us; and yet ... all history is human history, that is to say, intelligible, communicable within broad limits, popular in the ideal sense of the word."⁴

Unfortunately, since the days of the too-much maligned Ellwood P. Cubberly, history of education has

tended to be neat. The rough corners are knocked off of the tale of education and we find that, among other possibilities, the history of American Education has been a straight-line progression of clear-eyed men and women who have endeavored to create the democratic school of today (c. 1939), or that American Education has shown how the capitalist system has consistently exploited the poor (c. 1969). An exception to this affinity for neat systematizing is Frederick Rudolph's **Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636**,⁵ which was written at the request of the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education. Professor Rudolph attempts to think historically about the undergraduate curriculum since "that time long ago, when a peculiarly self-demanding band of alienated Englishmen got themselves a college almost before they had built themselves a privy."⁶ The book has many virtues for someone interested in American education. The writing is stylish and the treatment of the subject is catholic—for example, we find both the famous Harvard and the obscure Eckerd College here. But the virtue that I would most like to celebrate is Professor Rudolph's sense that the strange and the familiar may appear together on the historical stage. He will make sense of what he can but not hide that which he cannot. "If the world does not always make sense," he tells us, "why should the curriculum?"⁷ He warns us early on what we may expect as we accompany him in the history: "Thinking about the curriculum historically presents many problems and requires a willingness to accept surprise, ambiguity, and a certain unavoidable messiness."⁸

Let us take a single instance and consider the dilemma that general education has posed for the college curriculum over the last hundred years. Rudolph's account does not resolve the problems of general education into any simple conflict—as, say, between the sciences and the humanities. Rather, we find that the difficulty in the college and university curriculum is associated, among other things, with conditions found in the general culture, in family, church, and community.⁹ The difficulty also includes the intransigence of scientists who seemed not to care to participate in the design of general education programs because "they had carved out prestigious territory of their own" in the curriculum and could afford to ignore their poorer brethren from the humanities.¹⁰ The difficulty even includes the "absence of agreement on the knowledge that should define an educated person."¹¹ The formula of general education as set forth in a variety of ways during the 1920's, 1930's, and 1940's "ran counter to the country's style. Theory outdistanced an earthbound imagination. Yale in 1828 and Harvard in 1945 did not speak the language of the country which they addressed. They might have been 'right,' but truth was beyond authority. It was a function of process, investigation, and experience. General education, on the other hand, was not an expression of the dominant culture. It spoke for a counter-culture that acted as if it were the culture, it was an expression of the 'establishment.'"¹²

Perhaps this brief look at one part of Professor Rudolph's book demonstrates one of the virtues of neat history. Because it sanitizes experience into a few easy categories, it seems to suggest solutions. At the conclusion of the neat history of education already cited, we find the following predictions about the future of education in the United States. The predictions are based

on the assumption that a particular educational practice will solve certain educational problems:

An "avenue of progress will be in the scientific understanding of what constitutes and sustains human learning. . . . The scientific study of the processes of learning and teaching have already brought a new phase of technology into being in the teaching-learning machines. . . . "Within the curriculum, at all levels, from primary grades through college and university, it can safely be predicted that there will be increasing opportunity for students to study independently . . . The emphasis will be on learning how to learn, how to assess information, how to establish inferences, and how to judge critically . . . Subject matter will also gradually lose its sectarian quality, its specialization in exclusive compartments."¹³

On the other hand, the messy variety of history by giving us events, movements of opinions along with their antecedents and concomitants of all varieties, makes solutions to problems appear in a different light. There is an important benefit in this. Where neat history transforms human activity and institutions into a kind of clay to be molded and modeled according to some formula, the messy variety captures the quick-silver nature of those same activities and institutions. If we were dealing with clay we could shape things according to our desires—add a little **here**, remove some from **there**; we could quite literally be Formalists. But quick-silver is quite another and less tractable medium. It shimmers and dances. The very act of touching it causes it to slip into unpredictable forms. Our problem therefore is not to shape or model but to find balance among forces and circumstances, and to

recast our conceptions to keep them in accord with the ever-changing facts of our experience.

In this sense, then, messy history's virtue is in its formative effect on its reader. "Let man read history and he is not more sure, but wiser. As Trevelyan says, 'When a man has studied the history of the Democracy and the Aristocracy of Corcyra [in Thucydides] . . . his political views may remain the same, but his political temper and his way of thinking about politics may have improved, if he is capable of receiving an impression.'"¹⁴ Professor Rudolph's *Curriculum* is readable and messy—messy enough to be of use in the best sense of the term.

References

- ¹ Robert Holmes Beck, *A Social History of Education*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965, p. 55.
- ² Jacques Barzun in Joseph R. Strayer, *The Interpretation of History*. New York: Peter Smith, 1950, p. 39.
- ³ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. New York: Harper, 1958, Vol. 1, p. 221.
- ⁴ Barzun, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
- ⁵ San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 243.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 255.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 243.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 261.
- ¹³ Beck, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
- ¹⁴ Jacques Barzun, *Clio and the Doctors*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1974, pp. 126-127.

John T. Holton
Graduate Student
The Ohio State University