The Hegelianization Of American Education

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Anyone who has tried to traverse the lofty climes of the dense mountain forest of Hegel's abstractions is sensitive to the difficulties inherent in trying to comprehend what the great philosopher intended. Hegel claimed that he would teach philosophy to speak German, and a small group of American thinkers of the mid-nineteenth century tried to translate the thicket of Hegel's dialectic into English[1] and particularly to speak with an American dialect. However, this group of American Hegelians was not content with merely translating Hegel into English but wished to incorporate his thought into the fabric and practice of American life. Among the "American Hegelians" I have in mind are Denton J. Snider, Anna C. Brackett, Susan E. Blow, William Torrey Harris, and John Dewey. With the exception of John Dewey, most of these figures are remote to the contemporary philosophical scene, but they are people who had great influence upon philosophy in their day, influencing, among others, the transcendentalists of Concord, including Emerson and Alcott.[2] Snider, Brackett, Blow, and Harris were all associated with the St. Louis Hegelians. To a large extent, these thinkers were able to practice the Hegelian theory they espoused and had particular influence in the shaping of the educational landscape in the United States. John Dewey's influence, in particular, nurtured as it was in Hegelianism, took root and became a prominent theory of education in the early half of the twentieth century. The scope of this paper is to examine the theory of these American Hegelians and the extent to which they were able to practice what they preached.

The St. Louis Hegelians under the influence and leadership of Henry C. Brokmeyer and William Torrey Harris cannot be characterized as ivory tower intellectuals. The St. Louis Hegelians believed that Hegel's thought, with particular emphasis on Hegel's *Logic*, was gospel and that it was their duty to spread the good news through their activity to the tumultuous burgeoning of the American West, exemplified by the bustling city of St. Louis. William H. Goetzmann writes:

> Hegel viewed the relentless progress of freedom as a series of world historical events whereby the "concrete universal" was revealed in broad stages of culture or civilization. In *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (posthumously published in 1837), he turned his attention to North America, expressing a view of the United States similar to that of the founding Fathers of the American Revolution. It was the "Land of the

> Future" where the next great civilization would emerge, one that could learn from and synthesize the experiences of earlier cultures originating in the Old World.[3]

St. Louis, to these American Hegelians, represented the concrete Hegelian universal and the next great city of the new world. Thus, these figures set out to make concrete the thoughts brought forward in Hegel's *Logic*. This attempt is clearly revealed in their writings on education, the importance of education and the practical applications of education.

There are several educational themes important to the American Hegelians and which nearly all seem to share: the importance of general educational information, the individual child's development, and the relation of the individual to social institutions. However, before delving into these particulars, it is important to note a theme the Hegelians share which seems to elude those who now promote the technological or business applications of education. This theme is very succinctly summed up by John Dewey. He states, "I believe that all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race."[4] Compare this with Harris' belief that

> The first and most important of all educational literature is that showing the ideals of a people – the literature on which they are brought up – generally the sacred books which reveal what the people regard as divine; consequently what is the highest ideal to be realized.[5]

Hegel maintained that the motivating force of history was that Spirit, as general collective human consciousness, sought the realization of freedom for itself and individual human beings. Spirit accomplishes this task through self-awareness and self actualization. Spirit makes itself in reality, and not abstractly, free. Of course, Dewey shuns the view of an Absolute Spirit actualizing itself in the world; however, the central idea that an individual finds his own freedom in being educated in accord with the larger social ideals remains consistent in Dewey's thought. Harris describes this aspect of education in a dialectical way claiming, "This is the result of substantial education, which scientifically defined is the subsumption of the individual under his species. The other educational principle is the emancipation from this subsumption."[6] The free development of individual freedom is guaranteed for Snider, Brackett, Blow, and Harris by having the proper regard for the information a child receives, a regard toward the child's development toward self-expression and freedom, and making explicit the relationship all individuals maintain with the institutions to which they belong. Snider says, "The Community is the primordial unit or cell out of which Society is evolved."[7] Society's institution

and the institution of schools and universities is "not directly to embody freedom, or to reproduce it completely, but it is to reproduce the institutions which reproduce freedom, making it actual in the world."[8] However, Anna C. Brackett claims, "All teaching which does not leave the mind of the pupil free is unworthy of the name."[9] Brackett's assertion imparts Hegel's view that "The final purpose of education, therefore, is liberation and the struggle for a higher liberation still ... "[10] The American Hegelians are consistently concerned with the conjunction between institutions and the development of individual freedom.

Denton K. Snider's essay, "The Public School and the Universal School," expresses most clearly the essential Hegelian elements of general education, the individual child's development, and the relation of the individual to institutions.

Few people would disagree that imparting information is an important element of education. However, merely imparting information is among the most lifeless elements of education. Harris calls informational disbursement substantial education. The pursuit of knowledge is characterized by the American Hegelians as something inherent in the human spirit. Dewey agrees that education gives the child the "funded capital of civilization."[11] However, just imparting information treats the educational process as something merely external and not as something which is itself inherent to the child's educational development. Where education becomes just drill and regurgitation, the process becomes blunted, and Snider claims "it no longer informs but deforms the mind."[12] For the American Hegelians, each lower state of education naturally implies and leads to yet a higher standpoint. The individual is not in his entirety a collector of data. Any bit of information we might possess gains significance in regard to its relation to other elements. Susan E. Blow indicates this aspect saying, "Each thing is what it is because of its relations to all other things. Therefore, to know any object or event apart from its relations is not to know it at all ... To set it in the totality of its relations is to convert this partial synthesis into an absolute synthesis."[13] The individual, in addition to his own private concerns, has an implicitly higher moral element. This higher moral element is the attainment of one's own and others' freedom.

Since children are not aware of the implicit moral and ethical aspect of their education, this element must be stimulated by the teacher externally. Thus, education is not merely concerned with the importation of facts, but more importantly with the child's development as a knowing and social individual. The child, however, contains the seed for the development of this implicit nature she contains. Thus, the way, ideally, that the importation of information leads to the higher aspect of the child's development is largely determined by the child itself. Blow, for one, maintains that "Typical facts appeal to the imagination and through imagination to feeling and will."[14] Therefore, the inherent element of the child's imagination leads in a direct manner to the next element of the American Hegelian educa-

tional program, the child's development. Snider, too, claims that the child's development starts with what is implicit in the child herself. He says, "we make a new start, on the inside, so to say, from the Ego itself, which is now to be unfolded and made real; the true Self, hitherto overwhelmed by acquisition from the outside, asserts its right and takes the initiative."[15] The child, implicitly an adult, must be educated so that those elements which lie within the child's Ego transform all these potentialities into "a complete well-rounded, actual person."[16] Brackett compares and contrasts this education of a human being with the training of an animal. Animals, certainly, have an implicit capacity for certain kinds of behavior which human beings shape through pain or pleasure, punishment or reward. However, the training of the animal is something completely external to the animal insofar as the training is something human beings can recognize and not something the animal recognizes as his own internal nature. With human beings it is different. For Brackett, human education excites the child to create for herself what she would strive for, if she had a prior appreciation of those cultural and social elements. Thus, "... in proportion as he does appreciate it he recognizes it joyfully as a part of himself, as his own inheritance, which he appropriates with a knowledge that it is his, or rather, is a part of his own nature."[17] The American Hegelians believe the child's development toward her larger social self is an activity that should be more intrusive than Dewey believes it to be. Though Brackett argues, for instance, that an individual child's uniqueness must always be regarded, she feels (as I think do Snider, Harris, and Blow) that the educator plays a very significant role in the elements of education to be imparted. Brackett says, "Education is to lead the pupil by a graded series of exercises, previously arranged and prescribed by the educator, to a definite end;"[18] Dewey claims that "The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences."[19] For Dewey, in opposition to the American Hegelians, there is no succession of studies in the idea of the school curriculum.[20] It is the life and the self-development of the child that provides the basic impetus for what is to be learned, and the teacher acts merely as a facilitator for the child's interests and experiences.

Yet we find many similarities between Dewey and the American Hegelians: the generative element of self-creativity, the role of education as training for community-based decision making, the idea that through reasoned participation in a community decision making process the individual attains his interests and freedom, additionally, Dewey and the American Hegelians believed that their views of education were directly linked to democratic government. However, the American Hegelians differed from Dewey in that they shared a stronger belief that structures should be imposed by institutions.

Following Hegel, the American Hegelians believed the highest and most profound aspect of human activity was ethical. However, in order to attain the fullest extent of this ethical activity the Hegelians believed one must belong to an ethical institution, such as a church or a trade union. Hegel held that if an individual did not belong to a corporation then that person was cut off from her universality (i.e., her freedom) and reduced merely to her particularity. The American Hegelians judged that the concept "free by nature" is a specious and empty notion. To be reduced to the level of nature is to be subjected merely to the elements of matter and force. Freedom, as it is not an effect of nature, involves the moral element of universality representing an individual in his greater meaning. Harris claims, "External authority is a perennial necessity for man in his immaturity."[21] Susan Blow sums up these elements. She says,

> In virtue of this self-determining energy man is a free being; in virtue of the fact that self-determining energy is generic energy, he is intrinsically a social being, and must make himself actually what he is ideally through the corporate progress of history, and through those ascending forms of social organization which we know as the hierarchy of human institutions.[22]

Echoing these elements and underscoring the clearly Hegelian elements of the relationship between the individual and the state, Anna C. Brackett says in an extended passage

> The characteristic idea of modern civilization is: The development of the individual as an end for which the State exists. ... the State has become the means for his [the individual's] advancement into freedom; and with this very exaltation of the value of the mere individual over the State, as such, there is inseparably connected the seeming destruction of the wholeness of the individual man.[23]

The educational institution thus has, for the American Hegelians, the responsibility for educating the individual with regard to his relationship to the State with himself as the ultimate end of the State's existence.

The American Hegelians, particularly as depicted by these St. Louis representatives, are a remarkable group of individuals who felt their philosophy to be a part of their very practical lives. Denton Snider taught in public and private schools, conducted free universities for the working men of Milwaukee, held seminars for socialists in St. Louis, and arranged lectures for the ladies of the Concord School of Philosophy. Snider was also a reluctant participant in New England Transcen-

dentalism and the Concord School of Philosophy. Anna Brackett translated the systematic pedagogics of Rozenkranz, Hegel's student and a philosopher of education. Additionally, she wrote on the education of women in America and had a large audience through her column in *Harper's Bazaar*. Susan Blow, an ardent advocate of the Kindergarten movement and Froebelian principles, also founded a kindergarten and a training school for teachers.

Dewey is, of course, the most noteworthy of the figures we have been discussing. However, William Torrey Harris was the most influential of all the St. Louis Hegelians. Harris, with the mercurial and eccentric Henry C. Brokmeyer, founded the St. Louis Hegelian Movement. Harris, too, was intimately connected with the Concord movement in philosophy, which revolved around the transcendental, poetic Emerson and the industries of the mystical Alcott. In the last years of the Concord School of Philosophy, Harris and the Hegelians dominated. Harris was also the primary founder and editor of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy.*[24] But perhaps the most incalculable impact of Harris, and thereby Hegel, on the American scene was Harris's tenure as Commissioner of Education for the United States. Harris channeled, systematized, and standardized "the public school system of the United States on Hegelian lines."[25]

So many of the ideas discussed here seem so common-place that perhaps it is difficult to be sensitive to the impact these Hegelians had on the American psyche. It may be a testament to their success that so many of these Hegelian elements are not readily visible. However, it is important to recognize an important group of American philosophers who have not only left their mark and influence upon the American philosophical and educational scene with their writings, but who also felt a great need to make their abstract theories a reality.

Notes

1. Henry C. Brokmeyer, quoted by William H. Goetzmann, *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* edited by William H. Goetzmann, with the assistance of Dick Pratt (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1973), 3.

2. Henry A. Pochman, *New England Transcendentalism and St. Louis Hegelianism: Phases in the History of American Idealism* (Haskell House Publishers Ltd.: New York, 1970).

3. William H. Goetzmann, *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America, 19.*

4. John Dewey, "Dewey's Pedagogical Creed, " in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* 311.

5. William Torrey Harris, "Harris's Pedagogical Creed," in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* 300.

6. Ibid., 301.

7. Denton J. Snider, "The Public School and the Universal School, " in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* 269.

8. Ibid., 270.

9. Anna C. Brackett, "Education as A Science," in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* 280.

10. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right,* translated with notes by T.M. Knox (Oxford University Press: New York, 1976), 125.

11. John Dewey, "Dewey's Pedagogical Creed," in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* 311.

12. Denton J. Snider, "The Public School and the Universal School," in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* 271.

13. Susan E. Blow, "Kindergarten Chats," in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* 293.

14. Ibid., 293.

15. Denton J. Snider, "The Public School and the Universal School," in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* 271.

16. Ibid., 271.

17. Anna C. Brackett, "Education as A Science," in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* 284.

18. Ibid., 286.

19. John Dewey, "Dewey's Pedagogical Creed," in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* 315.

20. Ibid., 316.

21. William Torrey Harris, "Harris's Pedagogical Creed," in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* 304.

22. Susan E. Blow, "Kindergarten Chats," in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* 296-297.

23. Anna C. Brackett, "Education as A Science," in *The American Hegelians: An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America,* 286.

24. Pochmann writes, "Lest an erroneous conclusion be drawn from these representations, it should

be added that the twenty-two volumes of the Journal of Speculative Philosophy (1867-1888), the first periodical in the English speaking world devoted exclusively to speculative philosophy, provide formidable evidence that the members of the St. Louis School possessed something more than ebullition." *New England Transcendentalism and St. Louis Hegelianism: Phases in the History of American Idealism,* 22.

25. Ibid., 113.