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Revolution In Thought

by DAVID SKLAR

HISTORIANS vary in the meaning they give to the events they record. Some look for a single thread, some for several, but all look for meaning or, at least, an explanation of history.

A view of history that might be suggested is as a conflict between knowledge and ignorance. In this view, every step forward would come from the triumph of knowledge; every step backward from the triumph of ignorance. Knowledge would be seen fighting its way inch by inch through the web of ignorance woven into every society for the protection of what Toynbee calls "the dominant minority." The influence of "the creative minority" asserts itself during the growth stage of a society but is eventually supplanted by a dominant minority which is the effect of and the further cause of the breakdown of a society. Toynbee's analysis is also expressed by the mystics as the struggle of the forces of light against the forces of darkness.

With knowledge as our thread, we could proceed along the following lines: The object of knowledge is understanding of truth. Because of our limitations, we may never possess a complete understanding of truth, but the more we increase our understanding, the better equipped we are to solve problems, whether in aerodynamics or economics. It is only through understanding that man can be a problem-solver and nature's only progressive animal.

Truth is a most powerful force and the *only* real threat to those in the dominant minority. For this reason they take the greatest care to protect themselves from it in any field that poses any danger to their position.

The social sciences have most readily fallen into this category in the present age. The development of these studies in the 18th and 19th centuries presented the greatest threat to the dominant minority.

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But they have emerged victorious in the 20th century to discredit all belief in the possibility of discovering truth. The social sciences became overlaid with meaningless statistical studies which dazzled the unwary student. Popularized half-truths such as those of Marx, captured his mind and diverted him from inquiring into the studies of more profound scholars who were either ignored or deemphasized by the respectable authorities.

The underlying philosophy behind ideas prevalent today must be combated. How can we hope to find a solution to social problems when truth is believed to be a matter of opinion that varies with the individual or, with the time, place or social mores? How can we argue against the idea that there are no absolutes, that all truth is subject to change and therefore cannot be relied on or even discussed?

The essence of the current philosophy is only a pretense and is not seriously believed. Would the space ship have been launched on the assumption that truth is in the eyes of the beholder? It is the reliance on established principles that has allowed us to accomplish all that we have. Social scientists seem to take the absurd position that there are two universes: one where man can rely on natural law, and another where natural law does not apply.

Whether the prevalent philosophy is valid or not may be an open question but its effect is to lead us away from a simple, direct solution to our social and economic problems, because according to this philosophy no solution is possible.

The first step must be a return to the idea that cause and effect in social phenomena can be traced and their observation can lead to a definite solution of problems. But this involves a total revolution in the current mode of thought. Only a thorough understanding of ideas can equip us for this. But so equipped, we become a force to be reckoned with. Weakness comes from insufficient understanding; undreamed of strength from thorough understanding. The enemy is much weaker than we think.

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SAN FRANCISCO. In March the HGS presented a seminar for over 300 teachers at the annual conference of California Social Studies Teachers. In the past decade this branch of the HGS has mounted an action program to reach opinion leaders in the community through conferences, seminars, invitational classes and the monthly newsletter *Analyst*.

Several branches of the Northern California HGS now have part-time paid secretaries and are growing in strength and independence. A new printing press permits flexibility and economy in meeting the many publication needs. The purchase of two copies of the "Better Cities" film has given their speakers entree into dozens of community groups in recent months.