The Inglis Lecture, 1929

SECONDARY EDUCATION AND INDUSTRIALISM

BY

GEORGE S. COUNTS

Teachers College, Columbia University

CAMBRIDGE
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1929

PRINTED AT THE NORWOOD PRESS,
NORWOOD, MASS., U.S.A.

THE
INGLIS LECTURESHIP

To honor the memory of Alexander Inglis, 1879–1924, his friends and colleagues gave to the Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, a fund for the maintenance of a Lectureship in Secondary Education. To the study of problems in this field Professor Inglis devoted his professional career, leaving as a precious heritage to his co-workers the example of his industry, intellectual integrity, human sympathy, and social vision. It is the purpose of the Lectureship to perpetuate the spirit of his labors and contribute to the solution of problems in the field of his interest. The lectures on this foundation are published annually by the School.

FOREWORD

WHEN the invitation to deliver a lecture in this series came to me I accepted it with real satisfaction. My action was motivated partly by a consciousness of the privilege of associating myself with the distinguished company of students of secondary education who have preceded me, but more especially by the esteem, both personal and professional, in which I held the man whose life we commemorate this evening. I counted him among my friends and at the same time looked upon him as an elder leader and counsellor in my chosen field.

I have selected for my address the subject of *Secondary Education and Industrialism*. Several considerations have moved me to this choice. It is a

subject close to my own heart and one in which Professor Inglis, I know, was greatly interested. In fact, in conversation shortly before his death we discussed a number of the issues which I am raising here. Moreover, the subject is fundamental in character and is therefore in harmony with the spirit of all that he did. To a remarkable degree he was able to penetrate to the roots of the problems of secondary education. It is with a feeling of genuine gratification therefore that I resume this evening the discussion which was interrupted several years ago.

SECONDARY EDUCATION AND INDUSTRIALISM

GEORGE S. COUNTS
Teachers College, Columbia University

WHEN in the year 2000 the historian writes his account of the period through which we are now passing, how, I often wonder, will he appraise the various educational tendencies of our generation. He will no doubt have something to say about the extraordinary extension of educational opportunity, the structural reorganization of the educational system, the almost universal concern with curriculum making, the differentiation of the program of higher education, the so-called progressive education movement, the development of teachers' colleges, the tremendous growth in educational expenditure, the widespread

interest in the scientific study of education, and numerous minor changes in the structure and procedure of our schools and colleges. From his vantage point in time he will be able to assess in terms of their fruits that vast medley of currents and movements which now disturb the educational consciousness. Some he will find good, others bad, and perhaps many sterile. Certain tendencies which we regard today as full of promise he may leave out of the record entirely, while others which now appear insignificant he may bring into the center of the picture.

But let me hasten to reassure my hearers that I have no intention in the present lecture of donning the garb of the historian three-quarters of a century hence and of thus seeking for my own pronouncements a wholly spurious authority. To do so would be to assume the role of a prophet, and history

tells us that prophecy is a dangerous business. My hope rather is that we may detach ourselves from the present situation and view the problem of secondary education from a distance, and consequently in perspective. Let us assume therefore that when our historian speaks he is merely ourselves striving to view the contemporary social and educational landscape from afar.

In at least one respect the historian of the future will, I think, find our attack upon the problem of education gravely deficient. He will see us extremely busy with many things, some of which are important; but he will be amazed at the absence of any vigorous and concerted effort to discover the educational implications of the new industrial civilization which is rapidly overwhelming and transforming the traditional social order. He will see,

as we apparently do not, that we have been literally precipitated into a new world: a world which with a ruthless and relentless energy is destroying inherited values, creeds, and faiths; a world which is demanding new social arrangements, a new legal code, a new ethics, a new aesthetics, a new religion, and even a thorough-going revision of our ideas regarding the nature of man. He will see us in this strange fantastic industrial society repeating formulae handed down from an agrarian age when we should be searching with tireless effort for formulae suited to the world as it is; he will see us preoccupied with educational techniques and the minutiae of school-keeping when we should be wrestling with the basic problems of life; he will see us greatly agitated over the construction of an algebra test or a marking scale, when we should be endeavoring to make the

school function in the building of a new civilization.

Until well towards the close of the last century, or until little more than a generation ago, we were essentially a rural people but recently emerged from a pioneering economy. Except for the older regions east of the Alleghenies and widely scattered trading centers standing at the junction of railroads and water courses, the nation was composed of small communities based upon agriculture and linked together by bad roads and horse-power. The small, semi-independent, partially isolated, and largely self-sufficient agricultural village with its rural hinterland constituted the social unit of this agrarian society.

The social fabric, however, was no more simple than the lives which we led. We lived close to the soil and in intimate touch with nature. Most of

us earned our daily bread by the sweat of the brow and we knew the joys and the sorrows of exhausting physical toil. With bodies bowed beneath the burdens of clearing forests, breaking virgin land, building homes, and bearing children, both men and women grew old in middle age. Life for us was a grim struggle with the elements, material comforts were despised, physical prowess and courage were idealized, and the refinements of culture were unknown. Our recreations were crude, our religious beliefs primitive, our intellectual horizon narrow, our educational needs limited. And yet an abundance of fertile land, the absence of hereditary social classes, and the participation of practically all members of society in manual labor made men socially and politically free — as they have seldom been free in human history. It was in a society of this type that the

American system of public education took form.

Today, except for survivals in remote and inaccessible areas and the memories stamped by experience upon the minds of the generation now passing off the stage, this old agrarian order is a thing of history. Through invention piled upon invention a marvelously intricate and comprehensive network of railroads, boulevards, telephones, mail routes, newspapers, automobiles, radios, and airplanes has demolished mountain ranges, contracted plain and prairie, and destroyed the isolation that had nurtured individual independence and social differences. Steam, electricity, and petroleum, harnessed by mechanical contrivance, have given to men the strength of gods and made possible a mobility of commodities, persons, and thoughts which distinguishes our society radically from all

other societies issuing from the womb of time. And hand in hand with these advances in the realms of transportation and communciation have gone revolutionary changes in the economic order: the universal introduction of power-driven machinery, the formation of gigantic industrial combinations, the minute differentiation of labor, the improvement of agricultural tools and processes, the specialization of whole regions in production, the mastery over the forces of nature of which men in the past could only dream, and the development of an all-pervading system of finance and credit upon whose delicate balance the functioning of our entire economic structure and the material prosperity of all of our people depend.

More far-reaching perhaps in their effects upon human life than the material changes themselves are the new so-

cial relationships which they have generated. The intimate personal connections which held the small rural community together have been superseded by relationships predominantly mechanical and impersonal in character. Apparently the associations necessary for the functioning of the more complex society are so numerous that in the interests of mental economy they must assume a mechanical quality. The human mind simply cannot apply the spirit of the neighborhood to all of the transactions necessary to life under industrialism. Consequently, following lines set by social function, we have been compelled to divide the social world into numerous categories and to develop fixed mechanical responses towards both persons and events. In no other way could we manage intellectually the huge, complex, swirling sea of forces which has engulfed us.

A vast area of our relationships has been reduced to a certain form of order by the application of the pecuniary principle. A visitor from our old agrarian civilization would view with incredulous eyes our practice of equating all things in terms of a monetary unit. In order to provide for the easy exchange of goods and services made necessary by the extreme specialization characteristic of industrial society we have set a price on everything from ditch-digging to healing the sick and from beefsteak to works of art. The simulation of personal interest in the welfare of his intended victim has become a part of the salesman's technique; and there are those who would say that even what remains of friendship and virtue may be bought and sold in the open market. Obviously the problems of human living set by this strange child of science and invention

are many and difficult. Men have suddenly been thrust into a world altogether unlike that in which the race was cradled and in which human culture has evolved in the past.

This is not the place to evaluate industrial civilization. It has both its protagonists and detractors in abundance. Some contend that it has ushered in the golden age of material plenty, removed the curse of crushing toil, extended to all classes the god-like gift of leisure, made man the master of his fate, freed the human spirit forever from bondage to matter, and opened the way to unbounded cultural advance. Others just as stoutly maintain that it has made man the slave of the machine, forced all persons into a single mold, placed a premium on servile submission to the mob, introduced a blind worship of quantity, caused the desire for excellence to atrophy, given an ethical

sanction to the brutish struggle for material success, destroyed faith in the reign of moral law in the universe, loosened the forces of social disintegration, and set in motion a chain of events destined to consume both civilization and mankind. But this debate, except as it may furnish a truthful analysis of forces and values, can have no practical outcome. If our moralists should unanimously agree that industrial civilization is essentially evil and that we should return at once to the simple society of the past, their combined efforts would be but spray on the armored turrets of a battleship. We cannot turn back. We are at the beginning of an era. New inventions, new discoveries, new thoughts, new experiences, and new hopes have already been woven into the warp and woof of society. Education must come to terms with industrial civilization and discover its tasks in the new age.