DEPICTING TEACHERS’ ROLES IN SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION IN THE SOCIAL FRONTIER, 1934–1943

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Abstract. According to the dominant historiographical narrative, the social reconstructionists were a homogeneous group with a shared social, political, economic, and educational agenda. However, the pages of the journal The Social Frontier are replete with evidence that they were not in agreement on significant issues, especially when it came to the proper role of teachers in reform efforts. In fact, a close look reveals that the social reconstructionists presented multiple, overlapping, and often conflicting theories and strategies to advance the reconstruction of society, while explicating different roles for teachers therein. When teachers are placed at the center of the investigation, their factionalism, which has been discussed previously by C.A. Bowers and James Giarelli in their studies of the journal, is conspicuously apparent. Analysis of the different conceptions of teachers presented in The Social Frontier (subsequently titled Frontiers of Democracy) reveals that collectively, the social reconstructionists engaged in “more than one struggle”; and individually, they held views that were influenced by personal priorities and responses to the Depression, the spread of Communism and Fascism, the start of war in Europe and Asia, and, eventually, the involvement of the United States in World War II.

Introduction

As the Depression-era summer of 1934 came to a close, prominent newspapers across the nation provided commentary on the birth of a new monthly education journal. The Social Frontier’s subtitle described it as a journal of “educational criticism and reconstruction.” With its editorial board and board of directors comprised of prominent progressive intellectuals of the day, including George Counts, John Dewey, Sidney Hook, and Charles Beard, it was inevitable the journal’s launch would receive careful consideration. The New York Times reported on its founders: “That men of such high professional knowledge and strong patriotic purpose should undertake this venture will at any rate lead to fresh appraisement of educational values in the face of the changing order and make against the lethargy into which fixed systems are so apt to lead.”

The journal’s stated purpose and affiliations caused a clamor from the start, as when the Indianapolis News reported: “The [Social Frontier’s] announcement... shows a trace of Russian sovietism and it definitely opposes the right of the individual to better his condition if he can.” Soon to be lauded and criticized, The Social Frontier provided, through its unique brand of reform journalism, intriguing and sometimes unexpected representations of the rank-and-file K–12 American teacher.

The Social Frontier is considered by many to be synonymous with the social reconstructionists during the nearly ten years it was published. The dominant historiographical narrative presents the social reconstructionists as a homogeneous

group with a shared social, political, economic, and education agenda. However, the pages of *The Social Frontier* are replete with evidence that they were not in agreement on significant issues and especially when it came to the roles teachers should play in reform. In fact, a close look reveals that the social reconstructionists presented multiple, overlapping, and often conflicting theories and strategies to advance the reconstruction of society, while explicating different roles for teachers therein. When teachers are placed at the center of the investigation, their factionalism—highlighted by scholars C.A. Bowers and James Giarelli in their studies of the journal—is conspicuously apparent. Analysis of the different conceptions of teachers in the pages of *The Social Frontier* and *Frontiers of Democracy*, published between 1939–1943 reveals that, collectively, the social reconstructionists engaged in “more than one struggle,” and, individually, they held views that were influenced by personal priorities and responses to the Depression, the spread of Communism and Fascism, the outset of war in Europe and Asia, and, eventually, U.S. involvement in World War II. These events served as the backdrop for how individual social reconstructionists portrayed and placed teachers in their proposals for social change.

Through this historical study I invite historians and those concerned with education in the present to reexamine the theoretical and practical contributions made to education by the social reconstructionists. When one considers the range of views they represented, the accusation that the social reconstructionists’ contributions were disappointing because they failed to put forth anything of value is brought into question. Moreover, a closer look at this group of scholars and activists reminds us that within general categories in education, such as “reformers,” “progressives,” and “social reconstructionists,” there

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Depicting Teachers’ Roles in Social Reconstruction in *The Social Frontier*

existed and still exists variation in the ways in which individuals associated with groups perceive teachers, schools, and the larger purposes for schooling in America. This perspective pushes historians and those concerned with schooling in the present to seek complexity and variation within the categories that often are used to define educational practice, and to recognize that the existence of differing opinions as well as commonalities enable democratic dialogue.

Previous investigations provide useful historical context as well as content analyses of *The Social Frontier’s* ten years of publication, which peaked at five thousand subscribers for only a short part of its run.7 These studies highlight the intellectual and political contributions made by the journal, and particularly its role as a vehicle for the group of intellectuals who came together in support of it. Unlike previous works, this study places the teacher at the center of the investigation, analyzing portrayals of and proposals for teachers published in the journal over time.

Those associated with social reconstructionism in the early 1930s believed democracy could not be realized without paying deliberate attention to the social, political, and economic setting of the school.8 Moreover, they believed that the principal task of education was to create “an informed and thoughtful public opinion to support the development of a planning economy” geared toward meeting the needs of all people.9 This was a departure not only from the view held by the progressive educators of the day who, influenced by psychology, emphasized the child’s experience, but also from the majority of Americans during the Depression and into World War II who believed that schools must maintain the status quo for America to be safe, strong, and prosperous.

Part of an intellectual tradition that emerged at Teachers College in the late 1920s, those allied with the journal were associated with the social reconstructionists, or “Frontiersmen.” Many of them agreed with Dewey when he suggested in his book *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916, that schools could bolster democratic processes and could be focal points for positive changes in society. Many were also informed by Counts, especially when he challenged the status quo in American education by calling for schools to “change the social


order.'"10 A striking feature of this group of reformers is that they were able to find common ground even though they sometimes held vastly different views on key issues, as was the case for Dewey and Counts on the issue of indoctrination. For most social reconstructionists, after 1929 it became obvious that capitalism had failed America and was responsible for its decline. By the early 1930s, they viewed schools as vital to the necessary transition away from capitalism and toward democratic collectivism, and they established a "coalition" of members of the progressive education movement — both radicals and academics — in support of this goal.11

Historians have been rather critical of the social reconstructionists. For example, Lawrence Cremin argued that the Frontiersmen and others associated with social reconstructionism failed to provide concrete proposals for educators and therefore had little to no effect on New Deal educational policy.12 Almost thirty years earlier, a similar view was expressed in an essay by the sociologist David Snedden in which he criticized the philosophies of John Dewey, William Heard Kilpatrick, and Boyd Bode for their lack of usefulness.13 In 1995, Kenneth Benne, a 1930s reconstructionist himself, argued that they failed to address adequately an inevitable question regarding education for social change: "What will we do with unreconstructed adults while we use the education of the 'rising generation' as a major instrument in the refashioning of society?"14 For Benne, the social reconstructionists had not satisfactorily envisaged future challenges and dilemmas inherent to their goals. Bowers argued that the social reconstructionists, through their essays in The Social Frontier, "helped to discredit progressive education in the eyes of the public" and split the movement into factions, thus weakening it.15

The Social Frontier's editorial trajectory has been described as a pendulum swinging slowly from radical progressivism to a more tempered version just before it changed its name and affiliation (with the Progressive Education Association) in 1939, with a quick but lively jerk toward radicalism before its termination in 1943.16 Joseph Rowan suggested the journal had three major periods, beginning with an emphasis on the reconstruction of capitalism, then drifting toward conservatism and an interest in foreign affairs, and ending with a focus on

11. Feinberg, Reason and Rhetoric, 211.
pacifism and neutralism, with a final effort to revive social reconstructionism.\textsuperscript{17} While Rowan suggests that there existed common threads that characterized each stage of the journal, in this study I highlight the absence of a singular social reconstructionist perspective and underscore the various ways social reconstructionists perceived of and placed teachers in the context of their proposals for social change.

\textbf{The Frontier Thinkers and Teachers}

\textit{The Social Frontier} was presented as a publication for teachers, its aims described as “bring[ing] together in one comprehensive synthesis organized around the problem of education the technical, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic resources of the nation.”\textsuperscript{18} Dewey described the purposes of the journal:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The Social Frontier} exists, as I understand it, to promote among teachers, and among parents and others who are responsible for the conduct of education, [just this] intelligent understanding of the social forces and movements of our own times, and the role that educational institutions have to play.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

In the first issue Kilpatrick, then chair of the board of directors, described the journal as a “prime medium for the development of a constructive social consciousness among educational workers.”\textsuperscript{20} Sidney Hook argued that teachers required “a formulated social philosophy,” and suggested that the journal should aim to support philosophy development among teachers.\textsuperscript{21} Calling on teachers to work for society during times “out of joint,” Dewey wrote “teachers cannot escape even if they would, some responsibility for a share in putting them right. They may regard it, like Hamlet, as a cursed spite, or as an opportunity. But they cannot avoid the responsibility.”\textsuperscript{22} The editors were concerned that teachers would be complacent and thus suggested that the journal should function as “a disturber of teacher complacency.”\textsuperscript{23}

As it was originally formulated, the mission of \textit{The Social Frontier} was to help teachers in the critical task of developing a philosophical stance on the important issues of the day. Its editorials and articles advocated for teachers to be students of American society so that they would then engage their own students in examinations of the “already partially collectivist society.”\textsuperscript{24} While it was believed that exposure to the journal would help propel teachers toward the

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\textsuperscript{17} See Rowan, “\textit{The Social Frontier} [1934–43].”
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\textsuperscript{18} Editors, “Editorial Announcements,” \textit{The Social Frontier} 1, no. 3 (December 1934). The electronic archive for \textit{The Social Frontier/Frontiers of Democracy} is available at http://www.tcrecord.org/frontiers/; the archive is organized by volume and issue number (full text of articles is available for purchase).
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\textsuperscript{19} John Dewey, “The Teacher and His World,” \textit{The Social Frontier} 1, no. 4 (January 1935).
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\textsuperscript{20} William H. Kilpatrick, “Launching \textit{The Social Frontier},” \textit{The Social Frontier} 1, no. 1 (October 1934).
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\textsuperscript{21} Sidney Hook, “The Importance of a Point of View,” \textit{The Social Frontier} 1, no. 1 (October 1934).
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\textsuperscript{22} Dewey, “The Teacher and His World.”
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\textsuperscript{23} Editors, “The Stature of Educators,” \textit{The Social Frontier} 2, no. 4 (January 1936).
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\textsuperscript{24} Harrison, “An Historical Analysis of the Social Frontier,” 174.
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important goals associated with social reconstruction, the role of the teacher in social reform was and remained contested throughout the life of the journal.

**Intellectual Elites versus K–12 Teachers**

Although they purported their interest in and commitment to supporting teachers in schools, the editors of *The Social Frontier* have been characterized as embodying the “paternalistic wing” of the progressive education movement, which was often reproachful of the American teacher. In the early years, when the journal centered more on the work of rank-and-file teachers, Hook argued that “bewildered” progressive teachers require a “social philosophy.” Dewey described teachers as lethargic and timid and in dire need of direction:

> In spite of the lethargy and timidity of all too many teachers, I believe there are enough teachers who will respond to the great task of making schools active and militant participants in [the?] creation of a new social order, provided that they are shown not merely the general end in view but also the means of its accomplishment.

Commenting on their lack of preparedness, the editors wrote of American teachers in 1935, “The tragedy is that the teachers of the nation, as a body, are unprepared, in either knowledge, disposition, or organization, to discharge intelligently and effectively the responsibilities which events have placed on their shoulders.” They went on to assert that “if they but utilized the resources within their grasp, teachers could become one of the major forces in American life…. All they lack is organization, vision and courage.”

**Teacher as Radical Reformer, 1934–1936**

“Education is the social frontier.”

George Counts and his two associate editors, Norman Woelfel and Mordecai Grossman, led *The Social Frontier* during the early and most radical years, with its polemical journalism equaling that of the most respected progressive publications of the day. Launched with 3,500 subscriptions, its initial success is evident in the caliber and stature of the progressive thinkers, most nationally known, published in its pages. In the premier issue, Kilpatrick described its potential as an “expressive medium” for teachers who believed that education had a critical and “strategic” role to play in social reconstruction. The first issues were marked by a sense of urgency. “American society, along with world society, is passing

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26. Hook, “The Importance of a Point of View.”
through an age of profound transition,” the editors wrote in the opening line of the first issue. They continued,

> It is proclaimed in the advance of science, technology, and invention, in the growing mastery of natural forces, in the changing forms of economy and government, in the increasing instability of the whole social structure, in the swelling armaments and the intensification of international rivalries, and in wars, revolutions, and social calamities which seem to have become the order or the day throughout the world.\(^32\)

While accentuating the urgency of the moment, they presented teachers as central to societal change: “In the making of these choices persons and institutions engaged in the performance of educational functions will inevitably play an important role.”\(^33\)

In his first *Frontier* essay, Dewey argued that schools had been educating for the status quo, which he equated with rugged individualism: “Teachers and administrators often say they must ‘conform to conditions’ rather than do what they would personally prefer to do. The proposition would be sound if conditions were fixed or even reasonably stable. But they are not.” He hoped that teachers would make the right choices with respect to method of teaching and subject matter by joining the forces that worked for change in “the direction of social control of capitalism.”\(^34\) While Dewey’s teachers required strong and coherent leadership that would issue instructions “in clear tones,” he opposed providing to them anything that resembled an educational blueprint.\(^35\) This would lead to criticism of the journal and of the social reconstructionists in general.\(^36\)

**Teachers and Labor**

The journal’s title was chosen to mark the shift the frontier had made from the geographic realm to the social arena,\(^37\) but it also implied a view of education broadly conceived. This definition encompassed the professional and pedagogical role of the teacher in the context of a broad labor orientation. Goodwin Watson, a faculty member at Teachers College, reminded teachers that in solidarity with other workers they were on a path that would support “society in process of becoming.” Education was the “interpretation of the irregular, ever-advancing line between what a society has been” and could become, and it was understood to be the work of many, not only of classroom teachers.\(^38\) The broad view of education presented during this period was fashioned to unite teachers with other workers and professionals: “The first requisite for teachers’ identification with labor is a

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33. Ibid.
34. Dewey, “Can Education Share in Social Reconstruction?”
35. Ibid.
38. Watson, “Education Is the Social Frontier.”
clear-cut recognition that they are workers,” the editors wrote in the fall of 1935. Speaking to a broad-based agenda linking education, labor, and social change, they wrote a year earlier:

[The Social Frontier] address[es] itself to the task of considering the broad role of education in advancing the welfare and interests of the great masses of the people who do the work of society — those who labor on farms and ships and in the mines, shops, and factories of the world.

The editors advocated that teachers transmit their labor orientation to students, writing that “In the classroom, teachers might attempt to give their pupils, in the degree that it is possible in the different communities, a labor orientation.” Hook suggested that “the selection of a social point of view in education means the adoption of a class point of view.” He depicted a society structured by three classes — the owning class, the middle class, and the working classes — and argued that teachers must make their choice among these. While each one embodied alternatives of educational action, Hook believed the “social point of view” of the working class was most relevant because it aimed to remove the profit system.

Calls for collectivism were frequent throughout the first phase of the journal. A shift away from a profit economy to a collectivist economy was to be fostered in classrooms across America. In a 1934 editorial, for example, Kilpatrick wrote, “How can we expect to succeed in teaching a proper regard for the public welfare if participation in a profit motive business will later undo our work?” Teachers were to encourage children to question the origins and results of the profit motive as it existed in modern-day American capitalism. He continued, “When the common pattern is each man for himself, the growing child accepts and fashions himself on that pattern.” It was the job of the teacher to make sure children would not succumb to such a fate.

Social versus Class Point of View

Disagreeing with Hook and other authors, in the spring of 1936 Dewey recommended that the journal make its plea from a social point of view rather than a class point of view. He was confused by the assumption that the class struggle “will give educators the intellectual and practical direction they need.” Dewey emphasized the teacher’s “plea for freedom,” raising questions about indoctrination in the process:

Yet what is the point of the class concept as a determining factor in educational procedure unless it is to have such a controlling influence on the latter that education becomes a special

40. Editors, “Orientation.”
42. Hook, “The Importance of a Point of View.”
form of constant indoctrination? And in that case what becomes of the plea for freedom in teaching? Is it a plea merely for freedom to inculcate a certain view of society, logically entailing lack of freedom for presentation of other views?\textsuperscript{44}

For Dewey, education involved a “social awareness” that would lead to transformation. Dewey’s social point of view was more inclusive than the class point of view promoted by other authors, and it involved “acceptance of the democratic idea” as the frame of reference. In the end, Dewey argued that one’s position on the class struggle did not determine educational method, but commitment to a democratic frame of reference was capable of eliciting reflection and “energizing action.”\textsuperscript{45}

Not afraid to admit they were in error, and perhaps aware that they were alienating readers (as evidenced by subscription decline), in June 1936 the editors presented a revised position on the role of class conflict, giving credibility to the position staked out by Dewey and Bruce Raup.\textsuperscript{46} They agreed with Harold Rugg that the school must “confront the youths and grown-ups of their communities with the controversial issues of the day” so that they can one day formulate “alternative courses of social action.”\textsuperscript{47} They retracted their earlier emphasis on the economic question and began to consider other factors. Along with the change in editorial position came a change in the way teachers were represented in the journal.

**Indoctrination and Teaching**

Indoctrination dominated intellectual discussion on the right and the left during the early and mid-1930s, with the rise of Communism and Fascism providing stark examples of what to avoid. It began to define the discourse of the social reconstructionists and several issues of the journal as well. The January issue consisted of invited essays on indoctrination by Lawrence Dennis, F.J. Sheed, Earl Browder, George Coe, Boyd Bode, Harry Gideonse, along with a statement by the editors. The editors posed questions to the contributors, including “Do you believe that the school should be used to influence positively attitudes favoring one or another type of social living?”\textsuperscript{48}

Views on indoctrination, as well as corresponding teacher roles, varied across the contributors. Sheed, informed by a commitment to his Christian faith, argued that the educator must be partisan and “work intelligently to promote God’s purpose for human-kind.”\textsuperscript{49} Dennis, informed by his faith in a stabilizing elite,

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 242.
\textsuperscript{46} Editors, “The Class Struggle,” *The Social Frontier* 2, no. 9 [June 1936]: 267.
argued for teaching respect for the “prevailing social theory.” Bode called for teachers to “promote careful thinking by concern for free discussion, respect for personality, self-reliance, and vision.” He opposed indoctrination because he believed Americans must believe in the “intelligence of the common man.” Finally, for Coe indoctrination was acceptable because it would expose life under capitalism. Teachers were to engage in the crucial task of teaching about free enterprise’s many evils.

The editors made their intentions clear from the start. In providing multiple views on indoctrination in its pages, the journal was to assist teachers in their progress toward clarity with respect to these questions and toward the crystallization of a philosophy that will help to raise educational practice from the plane of uncertainty, shibboleth, and ritual to the plane of definiteness, social significance, and effectiveness.

Next, they situated their comments in the context of the overall aims of the journal:

If The Social Frontier were merely a journal of educational discussion, it would rest satisfied with the presentation of the challenging and stimulating articles printed in the foregoing pages. But it is more than an organ for the assembling of diverse ideas and opinions: it is a journal of educational criticism and reconstruction: it is an instrument for the positive fashioning of programs and philosophies.

The editors rejected the notion that teachers must inculcate “as fixed and final any body of social doctrine,” and the idea that objectivity in education was ever possible: “The Social Frontier consequently proposes to the teachers of the country that they ally themselves with that conception of social welfare which may be expected to serve the many rather than the few.” Believing that teachers along with other workers could bring about “a social order equal to the needs and opportunities of today,” the editors suggested that they “accept the responsibility of their calling” and “receive their education in the course of the struggle.” Dewey concurred with the editors that teachers by their very nature have “some social orientation,” but this fact did not resolve the question of what methods were necessary for changes to occur. Arguing for a “method of intelligence,” Dewey warned teachers that if they did not fight for “freedom of intelligence,” Fascism and Nazism would be close at hand: “An intelligent understanding of the social forces given by schools is our chief protection. Intelligent understanding of conditions and forces cannot fail, in my judgment, to support a new general

54. Ibid., 30.
55. Ibid., 30.
56. Ibid., 31.
social orientation. Bode took a similar stance some months later when he wrote: “We must ... promote sincere and careful reconstruction in the beliefs and attitudes of our pupils, without attempting to predetermine the conclusions.” Dewey acknowledged that the work of the teacher in this context was Herculean, but he believed it was in line with the essential function of the school. For many authors, teachers were to implement democratic processes, alongside the study of the controversial issues of the day, and not require their students carry a banner for collectivism. This position brought The Social Frontier closely in line with views on educational indoctrination published in other progressive periodicals of the day, such as The New Republic and The Nation. The question remained, would teachers know how to carry out their work with regard to the controversial indoctrination question?

**Freedom and Teaching**

Freedom in teaching dominated the final few issues of the first phase of The Social Frontier, with essays providing general suggestions to teachers. Dewey called for teachers to establish autonomy, to get out from under the “incubus” of the school board and its dictates so that “genuinely educative forces” can be released. Writing about loyalty oaths, Kilpatrick in the same issue argued for teachers to be loyal “not to what has hitherto been accepted, but to the best that better thinking can now find out.” He asserted further that “Our teachers ... must be strong characters, with strong human sympathies, with strong convictions — always held. Such teachers cannot be mere yes-men, timid of thought or action.” Describing the purpose of the free teacher’s work, Kilpatrick suggested, “Both young and old among us must learn ever better to criticize our existing American life and its institutions to the end that proper changes can be made.”

The entire March 1936 issue was devoted to freedom in teaching. Essays by Dewey, Kilpatrick, Merle Curti, Granville Hicks, Archibald Stevenson, M.E. Haggerty, Edward Reisner, James Wechsler, James Shields, Jacob Jablonower, Leo Huberman, Kirtley Mather, Louis Hacker, Frank Baker, Roger Baldwin, and Jesse Newlon, preceded a final statement by the editors. In the introductory comments the editors opined,

> Freedom of teaching and learning is the most precious thing in education. Let that be destroyed and the school passes out of the picture as a creative influence and becomes a

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slave of those great property interests, which are now endeavoring to stem the tide of social
change.62

Curti called for teachers to “wage with vigor” the struggle for freedom of
teaching.63 Stevenson encouraged teachers to enact practices associated with
academic freedom, including research, description of results, and the application
of these to the solution of social problems.64 Haggerty described the function
of the free teacher: “to clarify issues, to present evidence, to offer interpretations, but
to leave the way open for the less mature minds of his students to form their own
judgments.”65 Reisner expressed his skepticism regarding the fight for teachers’
freedom when he wrote, “Much of the present agitation for academic freedom is
the fighting of windmills.” He argued that teachers who are respectful deserve
“our honor and our imitation” because it is these teachers who find “a way to lead
without jeopardizing their opportunity for leadership.”66

For Hicks, teachers were to determine how and what to teach, and interference
with this function constituted an infringement of their freedom.67 Shields
portrayed teachers in a very different light, asserting that “The average teacher
in a public elementary school is not a professional, but a machine operator…. And who wants or expects the individual operative in a Ford plant to exercise
any freedom or initiative?”68 He blamed teachers for their weakened role and
argued that academic freedom was always available to those who understood
its true value. For Baldwin and Hacker, teachers had to align themselves with
organized labor in order to gain power.69 For Newlon, much depended on
the methods of teaching employed in the classroom. He observed: “It cannot
be too strongly emphasized that the scholarly and competent teacher always
runs less risk of incurring the displeasure of the agencies of suppression than
does the ill-informed and bungling teacher.”70 The editors, in response to the
various essays on freedom in teaching, reminded readers of their obligation
to social reconstruction and “the responsibility of teachers … to change
society”:

63. Merle Curti, “Changing Issues in the School’s Freedom,” The Social Frontier 2, no. 6 (March
1936): 169.
64. Archibald Stevenson, “Freedom Limited by Loyalty to Existing Institutions,” The Social Frontier 2,
no. 6 (March 1936): 171.
66. Edward H. Reisner, “Freedom Within Limits of the Attainable,” The Social Frontier 2, no. 6 (March
1936): 173.
67. Granville Hicks, “Freedom to Criticize Existing Institutions,” The Social Frontier 2, no. 6 (March
1936): 173.
69. Roger N. Baldwin, “Forces that Hamper the School from Without”; and Louis M. Hacker, “Liberty
is Indivisible,” both in The Social Frontier 2, no. 6 (March 1936).
In advocating that the school should present the facts which point to the inadequacies of the present social order, to the conflict of interests between those who are entrenched in property and those who create the wealth of the nation, in calling upon teachers to help shape the ideals and loyalties which can bring a classless collectivist system into being, *The Social Frontier* is advocating a policy of responsible freedom in education.  

Ultimately, the editors argued for teacher freedom that would enable teachers to "discharge their social obligations" fully.

It is likely that the editors were pleased to have 6,000 subscribers at the end of the first year of publication. However, subscription numbers soon began a steady decline and were never regained. According to Bowers, after the third year of publication, there was a loss of 1,000 subscribers, "a gesture of disapproval that could be attributed almost entirely to the extreme radicalism of the editorials." Reflecting back on the journal's first year, the editors knew their readership was not guaranteed. Hoping to ensure teachers that the journal was a work in progress, they implied in an editorial that they would work harder to address the concerns of the rank and file in the future: "Perhaps [The Social Frontier] has been too doctrinaire, too pontifical, too remote from the battles of teachers, as some of its friends have said."

**Diminishing Teacher Representations, 1936–1939**

In the fall of 1936, after a trip across Russia, George Counts became increasingly disheartened with the Russian experiment in the context of the purges of the mid-1930s, which claimed some of his own colleagues. These events and their aftermath contributed to the change of focus in his professional work, and to his eventual disillusionment with social reconstructionism. What prompted Counts to discontinue as editor is not known (he soon became involved in New York City teacher union politics in an effort to oust Communists), but it was obvious that the journal had to change its emphasis on the class struggle. With a major decline in subscriptions, the journal required reliable financial support, and it was suggested that the Progressive Education Association (PEA) might be able to help. But the PEA's financial assistance was contingent upon a more moderate editorial approach. Marked by a lack of direction and focus that coincided with a toned down political voice, the journal was led first by...
Norman Woelfel and then by George Hartmann (beginning in October 1937) during this period. This phase ended when the journal joined forces with the PEA in 1939.

Overall The Social Frontier’s approach to social reconstruction grew more cautious, and according to critics and admirers alike, the journal was becoming almost ‘respectable.’78 Under Woelfel and Hartmann, representations of the K–12 teacher, though still varied, became less radical and appeared less frequently. In comparison to the earlier years, the journal was more vocal in espousing its allegiance to America; highlighted Dewey’s strain of democracy and education over previous commitments to democratic socialism and the class struggle; bestowed more attention on international affairs and on college education; and, on the whole, presented less radical representations of the rank-and-file teacher. Alongside these changes, the journal was increasingly transparent about its financial vulnerability and the need to broaden its subscription base. A near desperate plea in the November 1938 issue invited group subscriptions so as to help “speed the increase of this journal’s audience and influence.”79

Some critics claimed the journal was “a communist sheet” that aimed to weaken the economic and political foundation of the United States.80 To dissuade critics of these charges, the editors emphasized the journal’s essential Americanism in the November 1936 issue. This corresponded with the spread of Fascism in Germany and Italy, which was a cause of growing concern in the United States. The editors stated explicitly that they had “no personal, professional, or political axe to grind. The viewpoint of the journal is based on the fundamental Americanism of the Founding Fathers as that has been matured by changing economic conditions.”81 The next year the editors referred to the American educational reformer Horace Mann when underscoring their commitments in an October 1937 subscription advertisement:

*The Social Frontier* exists because it holds Horace Mann’s solid faith in the beneficent powers of progressive teaching and learning as instruments of personal and social well-being. But where he often had to work alone we, his successors, hope to continue the march toward Utopia by the co-operative devices suitable to a newer day.82

The editorial espousals of America’s virtues coincided with a marked editorial shift. Essays from the second phase reveal that teachers and teaching were of decreasing concern to the editors and the editorial board. For example, the October 1937 issue included articles on police education, the Supreme Court (three articles), and Japanese militarism.83 A monthly page by Kilpatrick replaced

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83. The articles in *The Social Frontier* 4, no. 28 (October 1937), include the following: Editors, “Wanted: Better Police Education”; Bruce Cliven, “Where Do We Go from Here?”; Henry M. Wriston, “The Court
Dewey’s editorial page, also supplanting Dewey’s focus on education and teachers in a democracy.84

During this phase, representations of the teacher were embedded in theoretical essays that dealt with education in broad terms. For example, dialogue between Bode and John Childs, and later joined by Dewey and others, centered on analyses of teachers and teaching in relation to societal reform. The essays “Dr. Childs and Education for Democracy” by Bode and “Dr. Bode on ‘Authentic’ Democracy” by Childs appeared in November 1938, revisiting an earlier dialogue on indoctrination and method that took place during the first phase of the journal. Overall, Bode opposed a single agenda for social reform and argued for teaching democratic principles without a specific outcome. Childs believed that capitalism would only be corrected with a planned economy and that teachers could promote that agenda and still be considered progressive educators. Dewey joined the discussion and sought to clarify his own position on indoctrination while situating himself outside the either/or dichotomy put forth by Bode and Childs:

If teachers who hold that there is an intrinsic relation between actualization of democracy and social planning of economic institutions and relations hope to bring others to the same conclusions by use of the method of investigation and free cooperative discussion, I see nothing undemocratic in the procedure.85

Bode remained unwavering in his commitment to democratic processes over political agendas. On his view, the school and its teachers had the “special obligation of providing for the continuous reinterpretation of democracy.”86

Though the discussion between Bode and Childs was contentious at times, Bode underscored a powerful and defining feature of The Social Frontier when he wrote, “Carrying on such discussions in a friendly spirit for the sake of further insight is an exemplification of democratic procedure, and the more we can have of them the better it will be.”87

Apparently, Bode and Childs struck a chord. In 1939 the journal published responses to the Bode-Childs debate by H. Gordon Hullfish, Kenneth Benne and William Stanley, and James Skipper.88 In “Anent Bode, Childs and Democracy,”


87. Ibid., 106.

Skipper expressed concern that the conversation was out of touch with the rank-and-file teacher: “Professional educators have made a ritual of democracy and succeeded in convincing each other of the truth of what they are agreed upon, but all too seldom reach beyond the narrow circle of their own membership.”

Dewey critiqued Bode and Childs for their lack of specificity on teaching and school practices when he wrote,

> What methods, in fact, are fitted to bring out democratic orientation and devotion to social ends and values? How can our schools accomplish a genuine democratic orientation in students? ... Were the problems discussed as one of concrete, practical fact and factors, we should, perhaps, get out of the region of abstract generalities in which head-on intellectual conflicts flourish.

In July 1938, an invited essay by John Tildsley, a former District Superintendent of Schools in New York City, attacked the social reconstructionists associated with the journal. Arguing *The Social Frontier* failed to provide methods for establishing democratic collectivism, Tildsley called the Frontiersmen “New World-makers rather than School Masters” who were indifferent to the quality of education in schools. Disagreeing that total collectivism and the disappearance of the profit motive would be beneficial to America’s future, Tildsley wrote, “I favor the preservation of as large a measure of individual initiative and individual freedom in the operation, administration, and control of all forms of productive enterprise as may still permit an ever increasing measure of well-being for the common man.”

Tildsley argued that one of the journal’s biggest offenses was its tendency to view children as “merely ‘Futter’ for the purposes of the State.” He believed that exploitation, not education, was the goal of the Frontiersmen and, in the process, enrolling students in a “movement approved by probably not five per cent of the parents.” Calling those associated with the journal “emotionalized social reformers” who had lost sight of “the growing of children,” Tildsley’s piece especially attacked the strain of social reconstructionism articulated by Counts and his colleagues. The willingness of the editors to publish this scathing critique in the journal is striking. However, in the context of its dire financial situation, it also points to their interest in publishing opposing viewpoints, including ones critical of them. In the same issue, the editors announced that the PEA would soon publish the journal: “It is with great pleasure on the part of the Boards of both organizations that we announce the joining of

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89. Skipper, “Anent Bode, Childs and Democracy.”


92. Ibid., 330.

93. Ibid., 331.
forces. Beginning next fall, the Progressive Education Association will continue the journalistic enterprise so ably initiated by the original Social Frontier group."94

In 1937, Forest Allen criticized *The Social Frontier* for not adequately analyzing the outcome of educational decisions and practices.95 In Allen’s view, education still did not have a voice that spoke for it in the public press, regardless of the Frontier’s stated commitment to do so. In June 1939, in a letter to the editor, Chicago schoolteacher Nellie Day attacked the journal for being “detached” and out of touch with teachers in schools:

> Many of the folks who write for *The Social Frontier* now speak, as far as I am concerned, with the voices of archangels in beautifully perfect accents, but quite detached from and far above the ordinary spot where I work. Their ideas are so finished … that I feel they don’t belong on a frontier at all, but in a nice skyscraper with automatic elevators, and a reference library.96

**Teacher as Proponent of Democracy in a War-Torn World, 1939–1943**

Now retitled *Frontiers of Democracy*, the journal was under the leadership of Teachers College faculty members William Heard Kilpatrick, and very briefly Harold Rugg, until the final issue came out at the end of 1943. It was expected that a new title and affiliation with the Progressive Education Association would do away with the journal’s radicalism, which alienated subscribers, including a large portion of the PEA membership. As editor, Kilpatrick was particularly concerned with the wars in Europe and Asia, and essays on pacifism, isolationism, interventionism, and the problems facing progressive education in wartime underscored this focus. Teachers remained at the periphery as national and international issues upstaged them.

**World War and Education**

During this period, social reconstructionists, though still representing diverse views, were focused on the war over all other topics. Pacifism and how it pertained to the role of teachers was discussed by John Dewey, Norman Thomas, and former editor George Hartmann. This topic dominated the December 1939 issue, “The War and America.” In an article published in January 1940, Hartmann insisted that the freedom to teach and to learn would terminate the moment the United States entered the war: “If emancipated teachers are not vitally concerned with making all our institutions democratic, pray, then, who will work toward that goal?”97

Because war represented the opposite of the physical and spiritual development of the individual and society, it served to cancel out the goals of education. Hartmann criticized progressive educators for supporting the war, including the

training of the young for combat, which he believed was miseducation in its purest form.98

While Hartmann and others expressed pacifist sentiments in the journal, in October 1941 twelve of the fourteen members of the editorial board called for American participation in “the struggle against totalitarianism,” including entering into war: “We advocate full participation on the part of the United States in the democratic struggle against the Axis to the extent, if necessary, of actual entrance into the war.”99 With their call for democracy by military means, they hoped for a “civilization [that was] devoted to . . . the principle of free human intercourse and association, to the method of experimental inquiry.”100 The statement prompted a strong response, including canceled subscriptions.101 Norman Thomas, George Coe, Harold Benjamin, Harold Hand, and Stephen Corey all wrote statements against the board’s position that were published in the journal.102 Social reconstructionists were split on the issue of the United States entering the war, and the fissure it caused remained for a long time.

The board took a moral interventionist position on the war, with Kilpatrick, Childs, and Newlon joining together in the name of victory for democracy. They believed that progressive educators could not be neutral in the struggle against totalitarianism. America’s failure to join the League of Nations, Kilpatrick reminded readers, resulted in the “international anarchy” of the 1930s. It was America’s “moral duty to carry our fair and just share in the task of ensuring international law and order.”103 Childs believed that loyalty to progressive education meant loyalty to democratic, economic, political, and social principles and programs.104 The attack on Pearl Harbor followed the board’s statement by two months, and with it came a deluge of patriotism and support for the war. Backers of the statement responded with enthusiasm, as when Lewis Mumford declared war the only “choice between fighting and suicide.”105

98. George Hartmann, “Has the Progressive Education Movement Become Militarist?” Frontiers of Democracy 7, no. 56 (November 1940): 44.
100. Ibid., 11.
102. Replies to the editorial board’s statement by these and other authors were published in Frontiers of Democracy 8, no. 63 (October 1941) and no. 64 (November 1941).
WAR AND DEMOCRACY

According to the majority of the editorial board members, education had to enforce democratic principles during wartime. Before Pearl Harbor, Alexander Goldenweiser called for teachers to teach the peace movement in schools.⁴⁶ Kilpatrick suggested that teachers teach to “free the youth progressively to think for themselves” so they can create the society they want.⁴⁷ Soon after Pearl Harbor, Childs called for full engagement of all educational forces in the struggle against totalitarianism: “If we are to win both the peace and the war,” he wrote, “the democratic processes of inquiry, discussion, criticism, clarification, and formulation of aims and programs must be extended.”⁴⁸

With America engaged in a world war, the role of education in a democracy received full attention in the journal. Wartime education, Grayson Kefauver suggested, had to “retain as much freedom as possible,” with an emphasis on the study of vital social problems.⁴⁹ Schools and their teachers had to look honestly at what led to the war, to evaluate thoughtfully what role the United States should take in world affairs in the future, and to be made aware of the necessity of economic and social planning for the postwar period. Kilpatrick called for students in wartime to engage in community service efforts that would nurture character building and conscience.⁵⁰

For the editors, it was necessary that faith in intelligence and democracy underlie all educational aims at this crucial time. In December 1942, exactly one year before the journal was terminated, the board of editors issued a statement on the mission of wartime education:

> Our war aims and our educational aims are part and parcel of one and the same effort; we wage war to fight off enemy attacks upon our civilization and the democratic way of life; we educate to uphold what the war is to save — humanity, its ethical standards, and its hopes for world law and order and for an inclusive and truer democracy.⁵¹

*Frontiers of Democracy* became less financially vulnerable, and this may have created the opportunity for the journal to revisit its original commitments to social


reconstructionism. In February and May of 1941, Kilpatrick wrote editorials calling for renewed efforts to address unemployment, overproduction, poverty, and disease. Others joined in to discuss the role of education in social and political change, and these essays echoed the journal’s early activism, though their arguments were more cautiously expressed. Rights for America’s “Negro” citizens in the context of antifascism and democracy became the focus of a series of essays by Kilpatrick, Raphael O’Hara Lanier, and Ruth Benedict, published in 1942.

Rugg’s brief term as editor during the last three months of the journal’s run consisted of a lively attempt to return to the radical reformism of the first phase. When Rugg took over, he promised readers he would continue to critique the “aggrandizement of the individual” and would not take a neutral stance on important issues faced by the nation. Two months after these pronouncements, with a vote of twelve to three, the PEA removed its financial support from the journal. In his final editorial, Rugg criticized the PEA for not adequately addressing the massive challenges brought on by the Depression and war. For Rugg, the problem was one of misguided commitments: “The Directors have abolished Frontiers because they do not want it enough to work for it, or to fight for it.” Attacking progressive educators in general, he wrote, “Social study is still today the bugaboo of Progressive Education.”

Critics have suggested that Frontiers of Democracy, no longer a “medium for the development of a constructive social consciousness among educational workers,” became a mere shadow of The Social Frontier and sacrificed “its raison d’être” as time went on. Contemporary commentators on the journal argue that the editors oversimplified the economic and political crises of the 1930s, which served to mar the journal’s reputation and credibility. When The Social Frontier was first launched, the editors repeatedly expressed that some form of collectivism would replace economic individualism. In many respects, their


117. Harold Rugg, “We Accept in Principle but Reject in Practice: Is This Leadership?” Frontiers of Democracy 10, no. 81 (December 1943).

118. Ibid.


commitment to social reconstructionism at any cost was not accompanied by prudent, critical analyses of the numerous crises facing the nation.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The editors of *The Social Frontier* aimed to support democratic dialogue by allowing for the representation of a range of viewpoints and perspectives in the journal. Sidney Hook wrote in November 1934 about the importance of “intelligent discussion,” whether or not ideas were agreed upon: “The instruments of critical intelligence are not perfect but they are the only ones we have which can settle the problems that threaten to destroy social life and at the same time raise those problems whose consideration is man’s greatest glory.” The editors also aimed to avoid a “restricted and technical professionalism,” and this led them to publish editorials and essays that addressed educational problems interdisciplinarily, placing emphasis on the intellectual and theoretical underpinnings of teachers’ roles and work. This most likely contributed to the diversity of viewpoints that existed among authors as well. The analysis of education writ large presented in *The Social Frontier*’s pages underscored vital links between teachers, liberalism, democracy, economics, education, war, peace, and society. Those who led the journal understood that in the absence of thoughtful deliberation on these existing complex and overlapping forces, education could not be fully comprehended. James Giarelli described the editors’ quest for thoroughness and complexity in his analysis of the indoctrination debate in the journal:

> Ultimately rejecting both the view that the socioeconomic arrangement determines the form of cultural activity and the view that a critical cultural consciousness itself could transform existing social arrangements, *The Social Frontier* sought some dialectical interpretation that would overcome the logic of simple correspondence.

As a result of their commitments to complexity and interdisciplinarity, however, representations of teachers and their role in society were often theoretical and veered toward intellectualism.

The editors’ focus on interdisciplinary analysis of education contributed to a lack of focus on classroom practice in the journal, for which it was criticized. For example, in his 1935 essay “The Teacher and His World,” Dewey wrote, “What will it profit a man to do this, that, and the other specific thing, if he has no clear idea of why he is doing them, no clear idea of the way they bear upon actual conditions and of the end to be reached? The most specific things educators can do is something general.” He continued,

> I am not implying that it is so clear and definite like the traveler that we can look at a map and know “where to go from hour to hour”... Rather, the problem of education in its relation to direction of social change is all one with the problem of finding out what democracy means in

121. Hook, “The Importance of a Point of View.”
its total range of concrete applications; economic, domestic, international, religious, cultural, economic, and political.124

As the most influential and regular contributor to the journal, Dewey modeled for the journal’s other contributors a notional approach that focused on the social context of education, with explicit pedagogical suggestions glaringly absent. From these essays, teachers were expected to devise plans on their own, tailored to their own context and experience.

Related to the journal’s propensity to publish essays that intellectualized educational problems was its tendency to proclaim activism for the rank-and-file teacher. In reality, during the 1930s most teachers were not willing to risk their jobs at a time when certified teachers could not obtain positions. During this period, women [many of them quite young] made up four-fifths of the teaching force, with a large percentage of them having completed only two years of teacher training after high school. Alongside these trends, efforts undertaken by administrators in the name of efficiency removed the influence of the teacher in the development and execution of educational policies, reinforcing the alliance of the schools with socially conservative business interests.125 David Tyack and Larry Cuban argue that the majority of teachers during the 1930s taught how they were taught.126 This tendency was reinforced by a lack of sufficient knowledge of new practices and by the desire to toe the line in order to stay out of trouble.127 In his oral history of Ohio teachers in the 1930s, Richard Quantz concluded that on the whole Ohio teachers were passive and compliant and thus failed to unionize during that period.128 Activism, of course, was not absent in the teaching force in the 1930s. However, when teachers did take part in fighting for change, these efforts were often directed toward improving the conditions of their profession. When the journal was first launched, many editorials and articles implied that American teachers would be enthusiastic, card-carrying social reconstructionists. This was soon revealed to be overly optimistic.129

It is important to note that The Social Frontier was not itself synonymous with social reconstructionism and education during the 1930s and 1940s. A broader, more inclusive view of who the social reconstructionists were and their

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129. Bowers, The Progressive Educator and the Depression, 165. Here Bowers wrote, “That the preponderant number of classrooms were taught by women who were not inclined toward social radicalism was yet another factor that was not taken into account.”
various efforts to reform education during this period suggests a different story. Other efforts led by social reconstructionists—such as the short-lived undergraduate teacher education program, New College at Teachers College, led by Thomas Alexander, and the Program in Rural Education headed by Mabel Carney, also at Teachers College—represented a kind of “on the ground” social reconstructionism that was deliberately rooted in practice and communities. Because these efforts roughly coincided with the years during which the journal was published, a more complete picture of social reconstructionism and education must be drawn to include these and other attempts to reform teaching and schools during the 1930s and 1940s.

Historical research that reconfigures known educational categories, such as “the social reconstructionists,” has the capacity to raise new and important questions about educational theory, practice, and reform. While in this essay I foreground heterogeneity in a group of reformers most often portrayed as homogeneous, understanding both their dissimilarities and their commonalities is of significance to educational reform today. If the social reconstructionists held differing views on key issues, on what did they agree? What bottom line did they share?

We know they agreed that American society required reform. Vast economic inequality was unacceptable to them. They believed that disciplined intellectual analysis is crucial for understanding and addressing poverty and other complex social problems. They believed in societal change through dialogue, education, and action. They saw schools at sites where that dialogue and education could take place and viewed teachers as potential agents of change. They agreed that the purpose of free public education included the preparation of citizens committed to and capable of creating a more humane and equitable society based on democratic principles and respect for all. These commitments were their sine qua non and transcended their differences.

A retelling of the social reconstructionists during the 1930s and 1940s illuminates the multiple perspectives and bottom lines that existed across this group of reformers, helping us to understand more fully that all educational reform movements—past and present—are complex networks of agreements and differences. The ideas that brought them together as well as pushed them apart make them unique reformers in American educational history. With current educational reform being increasingly partial to neoliberalism, including the push toward deregulation and privatization, this historical case study is germane to the present.

130. Sonia E. Murrow and Mary Rose McCarthy, Remaking Teachers/Remaking America: Social Reconstructionism at Teachers College, 1932 to 1954 (in progress).