

The Social Meliorist Movement
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Education, like all of man's institutions has a history. From the earliest days of recorded knowledge, man has sought to shape his environment by civilizing itself through the development of the mind. Since the establishment of educational institutions in America, the content of the established (traditional) curriculum remained relatively constant only changing to add newfound knowledge and information. The delivery of that curriculum also remained relatively constant until the mid 1850's. Americans began a series of educational reforms that once started, would spark a dialog leading to a period of unprecedented growth, experimentation, and debate.

The various reforms coalesced around four movements. They were humanism, developmentalism, social efficiency, and social meliorism. Each movement was distinct in its characteristics. They were often at odds with each other creating contentious debate in the press, professional journals, professional conferences, institutions of higher learning, and meetings to determine educational policy.

I am going to discuss the key ideas of the social meliorist movement, its philosophies and its strongest advocates. I will also highlight some of the social, political and economic context from which its proponents propelled their philosophies. Keep in mind that social meliorists were seeking to affect changes in our society at large. It was their belief that our educational system was a valuable tool in accomplishing that goal.

The most vocal and published advocate for the social meliorist reform movement was Lester Frank Ward. Ward was a mostly self-taught botanist and geologist who worked for the U.S. government. He published a work that can be considered the genesis of the meliorist movement. This work was entitled *Dynamic Sociology*. He later wrote another important work entitled *The Psychic Factors of Civilization*. It is important to understand the educational philosophy prevalent at the time when Ward was beginning to advance his theories. *Dynamic Sociology* and *The Psychic Factors of Civilization* challenged Ward's contemporaries that were advancing a social theory called "Social Darwinism". It is important to understand that Ward's theories were at odds with them. Remember that Ward was a botanist and as such was a proponent of Darwin's theories.

Ward believed and expressed in his writings that the social Darwinists were mis-applying Darwin's theories. Ward was concerned because the Social Darwinists were not only influencing social philosophy, but they were also influencing educational policy. The person spearheading the Darwinians was Herbert Spencer. One of his disciples, William Graham Sumner from Yale was responsible for popularizing Social Darwinism on college campuses.

As Ward was advancing his theories, he was simultaneously pointing out the fallacies he saw in the ever-popular Social Darwinian movement. As Ward expressed his view of man's place in shaping his future in society, he also pointed out the profound differences between the two philosophies of Social Meliorism and Social Darwinism.

The Social-Darwinists believed that Darwin's theories of "natural selection" and "survival of the fittest" were not only applicable to "the jungle" but also applied to human societies. They pointed to the uneven distribution of power and resources as evidence to back that theory. Ward countered by saying that in society, "there is no alternative but to renounce all effort and trust to the slow laws of cosmic evolution." He also pointed out that as humans evolved, humans developed "the power to intervene intelligently in whatever were the blind forces of nature and in that power of intelligent action lay the course of social progress." Civilization, he argued was not achieved by letting cosmic natural forces take their course, but by the power of intelligent action to change things for the better." As he was attempting to discredit the Social-Darwinists, he was simultaneously advocating for his position.

In *The Struggle For The American Curriculum* by Herbert Kliebard, it is said that Ward would foreshadow John Dewey's philosophies when he said. "If any moral progress is to be made other than that which would naturally be brought about by the secular influence of cosmical laws, it must be the result of intellectual direction of the forces of human nature into channels of human advantage." Ward's philosophies were the foundation for the Social Meliorist movement. As his views are discussed, keep in mind that they represent the Social Meliorist views.

In essence, Ward blamed social inequality on the inequitable distribution of the "social inheritance." In Ward's view, all people are equal in their capacity for achievement and

learning. He believed it was the ills of society that caused the disparity of wealth, power, and achievement among various groups and not a difference in ability.

A strong advocate of Ward's Social meliorist philosophies was Albion Small. He was a colleague of Ward's at The University of Chicago. He gave Ward the ultimate compliment when he said "All things considered, I would rather have written *Dynamic Sociology* than any other book ever published in America."

The social meliorist position was not opposed to government intervention to solve the problems of those in need, they felt, however, that it was the current government agencies and special interest groups involved in the process that were contributing to the problem. The meliorists saw them as partisan groups with their own selfish agenda.

The meliorists were egalitarian. They felt that all members of society should have full equality of political and social access. This lack of equal access was at the heart of society's problems. They believed reform was necessary that included the need for every institution, including educational institutions to work to level the social playing field.

In representing the meliorist point of view, Ward made some very controversial statements. One such statement was, "The denizens of the slums are not inferior in talent to the graduates of Harvard College.....Criminals are the geniuses of the slums. Society forced them into this field, and they are making the best use they can of their native abilities." Ward ruffled more than a few feathers when he held a mirror up to the faces

(metaphorically) of politicians, social leaders, policy makers, etc. Statements such as these sought to spread the blame for social problems across the spectrum of society's institutions and decision-makers.

It was the meliorist position that schools and indeed the educational system was a key to social reform. As such, their effort to influence the development of educational policies was an important component of their over-all effort to reform society.

As with each social reform movement, there are critics. Herbert Spencer disagreed with the notion that education could be a factor in correcting the ills of society. He said, "It is a frequent delusion that education is a universal remedy for political evils."

To summarize the social meliorist philosophy, the human race is not evolving socially by some naturally occurring chain of events but is unique in that through its own intellect is able to affect its outcome. The meliorists also believe that all people possess the same innate abilities and that the disparities among groups in social power, wealth, status, etc. are due to the imposition of unfair policies and social controls.

To a certain extent, we see traces of the meliorist philosophy in today's educational policies. The strategy of using our schools as agents for social change is evident today. The implementation of sex education, character education, drug and alcohol education, and other "socially" centered programs is alive and well in our schools today. In addition, we are very cognizant of the fact (as raised by the meliorists) all people (learners) are

perfectly capable of learning and so all groups (ethnic, socio-economic, etc.) should have equal access to an education. A large component of the civil rights movement was putting laws and policies in place to provide that equal access. It can be argued the Social Meliorists were at least in part responsible for furthering the dialogue that would lead to many of the educational reforms we see in place today.

As I reflect on the relevance of the material I have digested in order to complete this analysis, I have a few thoughts. It is an important concept that all groups should start at the same spot on the opportunity continuum. Indeed it is true (in my opinion) that external forces such as economics, prejudices, low expectations, etc. are more likely to affect the education of a learner than any perceived differences in abilities between groups. As an educator, I feel it is my duty to help eliminate these negative external forces in favor of equal opportunities for all willing to access the education system. Indeed, we need to use schools for agents of change in a positive, responsible, social manner. The changes should contribute to the humanizing of our relationships with each other and contribute to producing citizens that positively impact their communities. The schools should not be the tools of ANY political party or ideology. They should contribute to the experience of being Americans living and interacting with each other and our global neighbors.