

The Educational Significance of the American Seminar Method: A Case Study of Herbert B. Adams and the Johns Hopkins Seminary.

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I

In the history of American higher education, two periods stand out with regards to European influence upon its methods of instruction. One refers to the late nineteenth century when those American scholars who had studied in Germany, along with some German scholars themselves, introduced the seminar in the newly established Johns Hopkins and Chicago as well as old Harvard, Yale and Michigan. The other period is the 1920s and 1930s when some scholars, notably a few Rhodes scholars who had enrolled at Oxford, transplanted the British system of instruction as "honors programs" into American colleges, especially small ones.

As could be expected, historians have characterized these two innovative periods differently. They have interpreted the late nineteenth century as the beginning of the American graduate school for the training of researchers. In contrast, they have depicted the decades after World War I as a major reaction to one-sided emphasis upon advanced research when personal learning experiences of undergraduate students have regained their *raison d'être* on campus. In short, historians have linked German influence to research, and the British impact, to education, respectively.⁽¹⁾

The present author once argued elsewhere that the educational "honors programs" at Swarthmore in fact envisaged promotion of research and caused resentment on the part of many students.⁽²⁾ Even though the programs apparently aimed at improving education, they encouraged research through two channels: first, by relieving the college teachers from the drudgery of extensive lectures; second, by upgrading undergraduate training to graduate school levels. In other words, the "honors programs" after World War I was in part intended to help advance knowledge on the part of small American colleges.

The present author would like to reverse the direction and discuss the graduate school training in late nineteenth century America from the point view of education. More specifically, he will take up and analyze the teaching methods of history at the early Johns Hopkins University, the first of research-oriented schools in the United States.⁽³⁾ He will argue that the methods advocated and implemented by Herbert B. Adams, an early Johns Hopkins historian, had implications much wider than a graduate training for research in history. Indeed, the methods may have indirectly provided the framework of educational theory for lower schools which John Dewey was later to formulate in 1899 in the influential *School and Society*.

The hypothesis here may strike some as paradoxical, because the seminar methods in Germany originated with university education in distinction to education at lower schools. In the historic process of establishing the University of Berlin, Wilhelm von Humboldt stated in 1810:

Es ist ferner eine Eigenthümlichkeit der höheren wissenschaft =
lichen Anstalten, dass sie die Wissenschaft immer als ein noch nicht
ganz aufgelöstes Problem behandeln und daher immer im Forschen
bleiben, da die Schule er nur mit fertigen und abge abgemachten

machten Kenntnissen zu thun hat und lernt. Das Verhältniss zwischen Lehrer and Schüler wird daher durchaus ein anderes als vorher. Der erstere ist nicht für die letzteren, Beide sind für die Wissenschaft da....⁽⁴⁾

When transplanted into the United States, however, Humboldt's intentions as reflected in the seminar methods seemed literally reversed. That is, their spirit would find their homeground in the theories of education at lower levels.

It may be in order here to justify my attempt to focus upon the educational aspects of the early Johns Hopkins by taking up the ideas upon which Daniel Coit Gilman, the first president, founded the University. In his inaugural address delivered February 1876 Gilman clearly expressed his wish to promote research in the new institution.⁽⁵⁾ Nevertheless, we simply cannot overlook the fact that he gave priority to education. On trying to locate the niche for Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, he compared it with four other kinds of existing institutions: namely, learned societies, colleges, technical schools and museums. Of these learned societies and colleges seem to have dominated Gilman's thinking. In contrast to colleges where restriction and tutorial prevailed, he advocated freedom and professional guidance for the new institution. Colleges would give "a liberal and substantial foundation on which the university instruction may be wisely built." In other words, Gilman envisaged a university for advanced and professionalized education in the atmosphere of freedom. For research-oriented Johns Hopkins, learned societies were another institutions against which it had to define itself. Here Gilman was straightforward. "In the universities teaching is essential, research important; in academies of science research is indispensable, tuition rarely thought of."⁽⁶⁾ Thus, at least in Gilman's rhetoric, education overshadowed research in the proposed Johns Hopkins University.

More specifically, Gilman's Johns Hopkins would implement a dozen points which had been determined, over the previous decades, through the experiences and experiments at the major American institutions such as Harvard, Yale, Michigan, Cornell and Virginia. Half

of these concerned education. One of these in turn referred to the university's object which was "to develop character -to make man." Its purpose, according to Gilman, was "not so much to impart knowledge to the pupils, as to whet the appetite, exhibit methods, develop powers, strengthen judgment, and invigorate the intellectual and moral forces." ⁽⁷⁾ The allegedly research-centered Johns Hopkins in fact paid considerable attention to education at the time of its foundation.

II

How did the early Johns Hopkins try to meet the conditions necessary for such university instruction? Beside launching a few new systems such as fellowships, Gilman recruited the original core of faculty from among those who had been renowned for their educational and scholarly contributions. For the field of history and political science, Gilman strongly desired to appoint Hermann von Holst, a German scholar specializing in American constitutional history(!), thus showing the degree of his admiration of German scholarship. ⁽⁸⁾ Although von Holst ultimately accepted professorship at the University of Chicago, Gilman's effort ended a failure. The historical studies at the early Johns Hopkins would be supervised by Herbert B. Adams, an American who was appointed fellow in 1876 on the completion of Ph.D. at the University of Heidelberg under the political scientist Johann K. Bluntchli. Herbert B. Adams and his Johns Hopkins University exerted some influence upon American scholarship through the publication of *The*

Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science. Along with half a dozen monographs in history and a number of articles on the methodology of history teaching, he also contributed to historical scholarship by organizing and managing the American Historical Association. Among other things, Adams introduced, for the study of history "the most notable, if not the first, truly Germanic seminar in the United States," and through the seminary, produced the roll of doctorates which was practically "a synopsis of modern American historiography" including historians such as Woodrow Wilson, Charles Homer Haskins, and Frederick Jackson Turner. (9)

What were the ideas of history upon which Adams organized his seminar? Let us first briefly look at their outline on which the current author would elaborate later. It is easy to see that biology permeated Adams's ideas. Thus, Adams commenced his major treatise on study methods with the case of a biologist who taught details first to arrive at generalization. Apparently Adams found basic analogies between the two disciplines. The first was that it was "the way to that which is general is through that which is special." Like biology, history too had to be begun "with that which is nearest and most familiar." Moreover, in history, as in biology, live specimens were "usually better than dead ones." The statement in turn reflected his judgment that *Life* was of "supreme interest to history, as it is to biology." (10)

As could be expected, Adams singled out geography, or environment for living beings, as the most basic subject for history. To study the history of the United States or of Egypt, for instance, pupils and teachers should first focus attention upon the respective geographical features which would "affect the people inhabiting this chosen land." Then, there should follow the study of human beings living therein. Being summarized in ethnology, this aspect would deal with "the origin and dispersion of races...one of the

most fruitful and instructive themes."⁽¹¹⁾ Finally, there came the study of historic sources in which people's deeds were recorded as memorials such as the Rosetta Stone or Indian myths. Should they follow all this process, students would understand the origin of written history as a reconstruction of activities of men in nature.

Given this outline, the seminary would be the best method for the study and teaching of history. In this method, students would participate in the study of geography and of inhabitants, as well as in the search for, and analysis of, historical sources. Citing an example from Cornell University, Adams quoted Professor Moses Coit Tyler's statement that the seminary alone would get students into "inquisitive, eager, critical, originating" attitudes which were acquired in natural sciences "from the work in laboratories." Though the seminary might not guarantee original investigation, it would afford students not merely "to ascertain facts, but even more: to learn how to ascertain facts."⁽¹²⁾

III

When and where did this method begin? Adams traced its origin to Germany, especially to Göttingen in 1733 through Ranke's Berlin, Heidelberg and Bonn. As he personally experienced it in Germany, the seminar method consisted of the following: the assignment by a professor of a specific topic to a small group of students, researches on the part of these participants, presentations of the fruits of such activities, their critiques, as well as free discussions. The German believed that "the scientific method...is the gift of time and the seminary only, the result of long contact between the mind of the master and the mind of the disciple." As such German students generally lay "far more stress upon his *seminar* than upon his lec-

tures.”⁽¹³⁾ Concerning general study habits of German seminary students, Adams specially noted the following.

Each student...is absolutely independent of all his neighbors. Individuality is a marked feature of student-life and student-work in Germany. Men never room together; they rarely visit one another's apartments; and they almost always prefer to work alone...By general consent German students attend to their own affairs without let or hindrance. This belongs to academic freedom.⁽¹⁴⁾

In the United States, the new seminar method was first introduced by Professors Henry Adams and Ephraim Emerton at Harvard. Both claimed for history a status as science and selected students who, in their freedom, were made responsible for their study. Research topics were chosen from among those for which ample source materials existed and the Harvard library was transformed into a “laboratory for student work.”⁽¹⁵⁾ Herbert B. Adams noted with interest the fact that the German seminar secured for Harvard faculty “a secular evolution of that old theological and tutorial system, once the common property of England and Germany.”⁽¹⁶⁾

Another American precedent for Johns Hopkins was the University of Michigan seminary by Professor Charles K. Adams, which started during the 1860s in conjunction with the elective principle for advanced undergraduate students. His efforts proved success, despite some deficiencies, in part because the Michigan Professor tactfully tailored the seminar for future lawyers by selecting for the seminar topic the establishment process of the British and American constitutions. On one of the later stages, Charles K. Adams marked a departure from the German method by allowing each student to do research and make presentation on “his own particular ques-

tion.”⁽¹⁷⁾

Now, at the Johns Hopkins seminary, somewhat in contrast to what Adams observed in Germany, the seminary was replete with a spirit of “friendly reciprocity even among rivals.” Certainly, individual ambition offered a strong motive, but there was “esprit de corps.”⁽¹⁸⁾ A graduate recollected years later that he found in the Johns Hopkins of the 1880s

a true seminar - a relatively small group of men around a table, with an informal relationship between teacher and student, that of companion and guide...The students felt responsible for their own progress and their own product, and in their achievements they found their reward. They worked together, made a showing to one another, and thus they educated their associates.⁽¹⁹⁾

Indeed, unlike German counterparts, the Baltimore seminary members seem to have spent quite a lot of their time together:

...after long days of work in the Seminary environment, and after the deliberations were concluded, students and often younger unmarried faculty would stroll the streets together in the direction of each other's rooming houses. They might stay up half the night, drinking chocolate, talking about scholarly matters, but also, and possibly more frequently, about such topics as religion, romance, and marriage.”⁽²⁰⁾

One hardly notices here the atmosphere of Einsamkeit. Rather the sense of community prevailed.

With regards to his seminary, Adams freely admitted German influ-

ence. As he acknowledged, two German scholars, namely Bluntschli, Adams's mentor at Heidelberg, and Hermann von Holst who visited and lectured at Johns Hopkins, have been specially instrumental for the seminary's development.⁽²¹⁾ The Bluntchli collection consisting of three thousand volumes along with numerous pamphlets and additional manuscripts made the core of the Johns Hopkins seminary library.⁽²²⁾ Even the seminary's research interests in municipal history derived straight from Heidelberg where Adams took his doctorate.⁽²³⁾

Nonetheless, Adams's seminary was allegedly American as well. Indeed, during the late 1880s, Adams claimed that Johns Hopkins had no intention "of establishing in this country a German university, or of slavishly following foreign methods. The institution was to be pre-eminently American, but it did not hesitate to adapt the best results of European experience to American educational wants."⁽²⁴⁾ More concretely, Dr. Austin Scott, who initiated the seminary, at Johns Hopkins stayed permanently in Washington D.C. then to help complete Mr. George Bancroft's project "for the history of the formative period of the American constitution." To conduct his seminar, Dr. Scott visited Baltimore once every week from Bancroft's. When taken over by Adams himself, the seminary was increasingly directed towards the field of "American local institutions, the earliest germs of our colonial, state, and national life."⁽²⁵⁾

IV

To be sure abundance of materials was one of the reasons why Adams urged the study of American institutions at home. "It would obviously be very poor economy for an American, living in this country," he held, "to attempt to write the municipal or economic history of any English Town, Ger-

man Free City, or French Commune, for which work the best, if not the only, materials are upon the other side of the Ocean. On the other hand, not even *Deutscher Fleiss*, or a German University, or the British Museum, "can amass and control the materials, manuscript and printed, relating to a single American city or one of the older New England Towns." Why should Americans attempt to write the history of foreign institutions when there was "so much to do upon home-ground?" ⁽²⁶⁾

Localism in the seminary, however, also stemmed from the theory of history which in turn was influenced by biology. As was already mentioned, Adams singled out geography as the basis of historical and political science. Just as Carl Ritter started with the study of the geography of Frankfurt-on-the-Main and extended his study to the "physical structure of Europe and Asia, and thus established the science of comparative geography," so universal history should commence with the study of geography of immediate neighborhood. Special attention was called "to the influence of coast-lines, harbors, river-courses, plain and mountain, soil and climate, upon a nation's character and history." ⁽²⁷⁾ Geography as environment offered the basic condition of actual history. Just as natural history was of no significance if viewed apart from man, so was human history "without foundation if viewed apart from Nature." Thus, Adams' students spent time not only at various historical societies but also at historical locations in Maryland, New England, Canada, and even old England. They were found in many localities just like a naturalist in quest for new specimens. ⁽²⁸⁾ The Johns Hopkins seminary had a Geography Bureau which had a major project to complete the updated map of Baltimore, "with a view to the preparation of a better physical and topographical map than any now in existence." ⁽²⁹⁾

When studied in singular isolation, however, the result may end up merely local. To be made more universal, local sources must "be brought in-

to vital connection with the progress and science of the world." A typical example was the project to study "German origin of New England Towns," an effort to trace the origin of the existing American local institutions in the Teutons of Europe. Reflecting the Darwinian theory which connected the existing, specific organs with the past history of biological evolution, local historic studies aimed at identifying the antiquity which survived "in the present in this country. America is not such a new world as it seems to many foreigners."⁽³⁰⁾ The establishment of such relations, once ascertained, would be equal to the "exploration of new countries, and the widening of the world's horizon." To study these relations in all aspects of human activities, one historian, or even one generation of historians, was not enough. The project would entail long, cooperative work across generations.⁽³¹⁾

In a few expressions about history, Adams apparently emulated natural science. In one place he referred to his Baltimore seminary as a laboratory where "books were treated like mineralogical specimens passed about from hand to hand, examined, and tested."⁽³²⁾ He also regarded the city as "a laboratory" for social and political life. He even advocated in 1887 the removal of the College of William and Mary, located in Williamsburg, to the bustling city of Richmond for that very purpose.⁽³³⁾ One might wonder how he tested books in the seminary. But there is no doubt that Adams wanted to make science out of history.

The famous dictum at the Johns Hopkins seminary, "History is Past Politics, and Politics Present History," indicated Adams's wish to make history scientific by starting it earlier than Greece and Rome. Not only did his seminary recognize "primitive man and society a worthy place in the study of rudimentary institutions." They were not "averse to the discovery of institutional germs, like marriage and government and economy, even in the animal world."⁽³⁴⁾ Their history substantially enroached biology, and no wonder

because Darwin had proclaimed that "scientific and historical concepts are far from opposed but mutually supplement and need one another."⁽³⁵⁾

Given this scientism in history, scholars would have to be trained to understand history as interactions between human beings and their environment as they were recorded in the past and manifested in the present. University seminaries would have a unique role to foster this awareness systematically and practically among a new generation of historians. Also required would be the extension of mere local awareness into "historic worth and dignity" on the part of school children, because modern local life in fact sustained "cosmopolitan relations" involving national and international life. Again, they should be encouraged to "investigate the most ordinary things, for these are often the most archaic." Thus, if students and teachers were fully enlightened, they would "look about their own homes before visiting the land of Chaldaea." In Adams's opinion, the common school was responsible for developing this aspect of historical training.⁽³⁶⁾

If universities and schools understood the essence of history as consisting in the connection of the past and the present, the study of history would become "simply a learning by inquiry." The pursuit of history would then be "an active instead of a passive process," which would bring about "an increasing joy instead of a depressing burden." Indeed, according to Adams, it was precisely this "active self-knowledge and philosophic reflection" which made "history a living science instead of a museum of facts and books 'as dry as dust.'"⁽³⁷⁾ Here is stated in historical terms, the author believes, an educational principle which is akin to, and even more purified than, the pragmatic educational principle of "learning by doing", which was to be elaborated later by John Dewey.

V

Referring to a distinctive merit of seminars, a modern American historian has stated that it incorporated "methods with subject matter." Only through this method, he argues, students would learn both "how" as well as "what" of history simultaneously.⁽³⁸⁾ When seen against the background of history of education, it seems clear that the seminar had other significant implications, which may be stated as follows.

In advocating the seminar method, Adams helped change the place of textbooks in schools and colleges. Formerly, they stood as authorities with somewhat mystical origins. Now, they have become the object of critical analysis. Similarly reversed were the relative values of the far and the near as historical sources. In contrast to the times when those things remote, both in time and space, were admired, habits, customs, institutions, and resources, all located in immediate environment, presently augmented their value. Scientism in history bestowed new significance upon localism.

At the levels of the common school, history education was to combine textbooks and local resources for mutual elucidation. Universities had a role to play here by filling the gaps thus created between textbooks and local resources. They had to positively ascertain the relations between the two. They had to train a new type of history teachers. And the seminar was the ideal device. In short, with nineteenth-century biology in its background, the seminar method in historical study has fully shown the educational implications of the scientific revolution for universities down through the common schools of the period.

It is no wonder that Adams's historical methods resemble the educational theory of pragmatism, especially that of John Dewey. As shown in his logical works, Dewey made it one of his major tasks to translate scientific

methods into those for education and learning. Again, evolutionism offered a major incentive to his *Democracy and Education*.⁽³⁹⁾ Moreover, Dewey himself spent two years in the very John Hopkins from 1882 through 1884 and minored in history and political science when Adams markedly "concentrated his energy to education."⁽⁴⁰⁾ Although his early evaluation of Adams was not high, the same also applied to Dewey's attitude to another Hopkins instructor, Charles Sanders Peirce, to whose logical work Dewey was later to be much indebted.⁽⁴¹⁾ Whatever were the specific influences of the Americanized Johns Hopkins seminary upon the future leader of progressive education in the United States, scientism, evolutionism and democratic ways of life as applied to university-level historical studies, gave unmistakable orientation to the educational philosophy of John Dewey. The role of universities, specially of the Johns Hopkins seminary, in the promotion of the new theories and practices at lower levels of education may well become an interesting topic for historians of education.

Footnotes

- (1) See: Frederick Rudolph. *The American College and University: A History*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1965, chapters 16 and 21; John S. Brubacher and Willis Rudy. *Higher Education in Transition*. 3rd edition, New York, Harper & Row, 1976, chapters 9 and 13.
- (2) See Akira Tachikawa. "Honors Program on Trial: Swarthmore in the 1920s." *Journal of the Midwest History of Education Society*, (US) XIX (1991), pp.130-140.

- (3) For the founding and early years of Johns Hopkins, see Hugh Hawkins. *Pioneer: A History of the Johns Hopkins University, 1874-1889*. Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 1960.
- (4) Wilhelm von Humboldt. *Schriften zur Politik und zum Bildungs= wesen. (Werke in Fünf Bänden IV)*, Stuttgart, J. G. Cotta, 1964, p.256.
- (5) See *Inaugural Address of Daniel Coit Gilman, 1876*. Baltimore, the Johns Hopkins University, n.d., p.35.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p.14.
- (7) See *ibid.*, pp.17-19; cf. Johns Hopkins University. *First Annual Report*, Baltimore, Md., 1876, pp.15-16. (Johns Hopkins University Archives.)
- (8) See Hawkins, *op.cit.*
- (9) Bert James Loewenberg. *American History in American Thought*. New York, Simon Schuster, 1972, pp.367, 404.
- (10) Herbert B. Adams. "New Methods of Study in History." *The Johns Hopkins Studies in Historical and Political Science*. Second Series, I-II (Jan. Feb. 1884), pp.25-28.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p.28.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p.35.
- (13) *Ibid.*, p.71.
- (14) *Ibid.*, pp.78-79.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p.94.
- (16) Herbert B. Adams. *The Study of History in American Colleges and Universities*. Washington, Government Printing Office, 1887, p.22.
- (17) *Ibid.*, p.109.
- (18) Adams. "New Methods of Study in History." p.109.
- (19) James Albert Woodburn. "A Noteworthy University Seminary in History: Reminiscences and Personalities." *The Johns Hopkins Alumni Magazine*, XXII (Nov. 1933 - June 1934), p.132.

- (20) Marvin E. Gettleman ed. *The Johns Hopkins University Seminary of History and Politics*. vol.I, New York, Garland, 1987, p.10.
- (21) See Adams. "New Methods of Study in History." p.106.
- (22) See Edward Engle. "The First Ten Years at Johns Hopkins." *The Johns Hopkins Alumni Magazine*, IV, (Nov.1915– June 1916), p.14.
- (23) See Richard T. Ely. "A Sketch of the Life and Services of Herbert Baxter Adams." *Herbert B. Adams: Tributes of Friends*. Baltimore, the Johns Hopkins Press, 1902, p.40.
- (24) Adams, "New Methods of Study in History." pp.97–98.
- (25) *Ibid.*, pp.98–100.
- (26) Herbert B. Adams. "Cooperation in University Work." *The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, I (1883), pp.55–56.
- (27) Adams. "New Methods of Study in History." p.129.
- (28) See Adams. *The Study of History in American Colleges and Universities*. p.178.
- (29) Adams. "New Methods of Study in History." p.130.
- (30) Herbert B. Adams. "Special Methods of Historical Study." In G. Stanley Hall ed. *Methods of Teaching History*. Boston, Ginn, Heath & Co., 1885, p.131.
- (31) See *Ibid.*, p.127.
- (32) Adams. "New Methods of Study in History." p.103.
- (33) See John Martin Vincent. "Herbert B. Adams." Howard W. Odum ed. *American Masters of Social Science*. New York, Henry Holt & Co., 1927 p. 118.
- (34) Herbert B. Adams. "Is History Past Politics?" *The Johns Hopkins Studies in Historical and Political Science*. 13th Series, III–IV (March & April 1895), p.71.

- (35) Loewenberg. *op. cit.*, p.397.
- (36) See Adams. "Special Methods of Historical Study." pp.127-132. Adams slightly changed his mind later about the proper subject for small children who are "always gifted with imagination. They rejoice in the thought of lands that are far off, of men who lived in olden times." (See Herbert B. Adams. "The Study and Teaching of History." *Chautauqua Assembly Herald*, August 10, 1897, p.3: Johns Hopkins University Archives)
- (37) Adams. "Special Methods of History Study." pp.132-133.
- (38) See Walter Rundell, Jr. *In Pursuit of American History: Research and Training in the United States*. Norman, Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1970, p.14.
- (39) See John Dewey. *How We Think*. Lexington, D. C. Heath, 1910, 1933; "Preface" to *Democracy and Education*. New York, Macmillan Co., 1916.
- (40) Loewenberg. *op. cit.*, p.377. Adams's major works on the methods of study and teaching in history appeared between 1883 and 1885.
- (41) See George Dykhuizen. *The Life and Mind of John Dewey*. Carbondale, Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1973, p.30; John Dewey. *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. New York, Henry Holt & Co., 1938, p.9 n.