

Merle Curti and the Development of Peace History in American Thought and Culture

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INTRODUCTION

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1943 for his important work, *The Growth of American Thought*, Curti was responsible for introducing a serious tone to the study of peace history in American education. In the 1920s and 1930s he produced a series of books that called attention to peace efforts in the American past. In 1964 he was one of the founding members of the Peace History Society.

BACKGROUND

Born near Omaha, Nebraska on September 15, 1898, Curti received all his degrees from Harvard University. An important figure in American historiography, Curti was one of Frederick Jackson Turner's last students at Harvard and a close friend of the progressive historian, Charles Beard. After receiving his Ph.D. in history in 1927 Curti devoted his early research to the study of peace history while teaching at Smith and Teachers College, Columbia University before accepting an endowed chair at the University of Wisconsin in 1942 and from which he retired in 1968.

The field of American peace history as an academic enterprise actually began with Curti. Caught up in the atmosphere of post-World War I disillusionment, Curti expressed a strong interest in pacifist ideas and peace movements. The writings of progressive historians like Charles Beard and Vernon L. Parrington had a far-reaching impact on Curti's own intellectual development. Just as important in shaping his thought were the instrumentalist views of John Dewey. Dewey's attempt to use instrumentalism in order to shape humanity's future through the application of modern intelligence to social problems permeated almost all of Curti's writings, especially his seminal work, *The Growth of American Thought* (1943).

Curti's published works on the importance of peace research in history drew heavily on Dewey's instrumentalism. In tracing the social history of ideas and the relationship of ideas to society, Curti focused on peace as one of the most important topics in education. Throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s Curti produced a series of books alerting the academic community to peace studies as a worthy subject of investigation. In 1929 his doctoral dissertation, supervised by Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., was published as *The American Peace Crusade, 1815-1860*; in 1931 *Bryan and World Peace* appeared; four years later his most noted work in the history of education, tinged with Marxian idealism, *The Social Ideas of American Educators*, was placed on library shelves; a year later his *magnum opus* in the field of peace history came out entitled, *Peace or War: The American Struggle, 1636-1936*; in 1937 the edited letters and diaries of nineteenth century peace leader Elihu Burritt was printed as *The Learned Blacksmith*; and in 1946 his commentary on the ideological origins of American patriotism was published as *The Roots of American Loyalty*. Such an impressive body of historical work related to the subject of peace established the field as a scholarly endeavor. A number of Curti students, including Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., Robert Bowers, Lawrence S. Wittner, Harold Josephson, and Arthur I. Waskow would become noted peace scholars by the 1950s, and 1960s. During the Vietnam War the study of peace history grew exponentially with many younger historians following Curti's lead.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO PEACE HISTORY EDUCATION

Curti's historical examination of pacifist ideals and peace movements can be categorized into three general areas. First, an instrumentalist view that the history of pacifist ideals could operate

as a creative mechanism for changing the world. Second, a subjective belief that the study of peace movements can be just as exciting and rewarding as studies of major battles and wars. Third, was a rational analysis of the need to present to the public the true meaning of patriotism and national devotion. Portraying the fate of pacifism and peace activism in the past as a means of increasing our understanding and possible success of peace efforts in the future was a major premise of Curti's approach to peace research in history. He dealt consistently with the belief that society does contain enlightened individuals who recognize the value of human life. This thesis shaped the initial parameters of peace history which later scholars would emulate.

Curti's reputation as America's first scholarly peace historian began with the appearance of *The American Peace Crusade* (1929). For a number of reasons this work initiated a more careful look at peace studies and why it should be taken seriously. First, Curti portrayed the peace pioneers as practical idealists with achievable goals: "The historian is interested in the recorded dreams of the past because they reflect the needs of the dreamers, and also because they sometimes point ahead to future realization." The theme of peace as social progress, noticeably apparent in all his peace writings, is first mentioned in this work: "A characteristic of waking dreams which continue to possess the imagination of men is that they are likely to stimulate the dreamers to action." These "changes often represent plans, dreams if you will, which after centuries become realities." Second, "the movement was, in fact, part of a general humanitarian development which had its origin. . . in the development of eighteenth-century idealistic doctrines." Third, peace work has also been defined by its internationalism such that "from the very beginning of the movement for international peace, its champions, free from a narrowly patriotic desire for leadership, showed genuine international-mindedness in their efforts to stimulate and to cooperate with opponents of war in other countries." Fourth, he offered a carefully balanced appraisal of peacemaking. The "early organizers of the peace movement" were "men of sober vision" who "saw that bricks could not be made out of straw and that if peace ideals were to prevail, there would have to be definite organization, hard work, and careful planning for the future." Finally, his *Peace Crusade* was designed to alert future historians to the reality that the "organization for peace in America . . . is to be understood as only one expression of a larger philanthropic enthusiasm for perfecting man and society, an enthusiasm rooted deep in prevalent social theory. . . ." (Curti, 1929, pp. 3-20).

Despite the peace movement's "development of a body of brilliant arguments against war," Curti was smart enough to caution peace researchers regarding the achievement of immediate practical ends (1929, p. 21). In order to understand how peace history research could further the cause of humanitarianism it was also important to comprehend the forces working against it. This is where Curti provided valuable counsel to the emerging discipline. He pointed out that the inertia of human nature, marked by the persistence of social and political habits of long standing, very often mitigates those forces calling for change. Peace sentiment also met with resistance regarding how far the principles of pacifism should be carried. Most people are against war but very few would adopt a pacifist stance. Pacifism also failed to capture the fancy of special economic interests. In the past wars have been waged over imperial interests and geographic acquisition. This fact, coupled with peace ideals conflicting with other liberal ideals such as social and economic equality, he noted, accounts for the lack of successful permanency.

Yet what kept Curti going was the obvious realization "that peace men themselves stood by their colors as well as they did" (1929, pp. 227-228). Promoting peace history education required more thoughtful analysis as well as concrete evidence. Here he was able to supply a glimmer of hope with the publication of *Bryan and World Peace* in 1931. William Jennings Bryan, former Populist and Democratic presidential candidate and Secretary of State in the Wilson Administration until the outbreak of World War I, deserved recognition for the arbitration treaties he helped promote. It did not matter, in terms of his instrumentalism, that "outside the circle of the peace movement, the Bryan Treaties were not taken seriously, partly because Bryan sponsored them, partly because they provided no sanctions, partly because the majority of them were signed after

the world war had already defied the sanctity of international agreements." What did matter was that "The principle of abstention from hostilities during a period of investigation and attempted conciliation, provided for by Article 12 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, is plainly the principle of the Bryan treaties" (1931, pp. 130-131, 165-166).

Although Curti finally had something concrete to hang his hat on, it was the publication of *Peace or War* in 1936 which popularized peace history education. What Curti did was extend his chronological analysis first presented in *The American Peace Crusade* and bring the story to the present. He also went further in terms of his economic analysis by criticizing the middle-class orientation of peace reform. More effort had to be made to reach the working classes who, generally, shoulder most of the burden in fighting wars. In this work Curti also insisted that the peace movement had always been part of a much larger story of social change. "What Americans did to limit or uproot the war system," he wrote, "was at every point affected by the traditions and ideals of American life which were dominant in varying degrees at different times" (1936, p. 14). The book represented "the first systematic chronological overview of American peace activism," and was widely received in both popular and academic circles (DeBenedetti, 1984, pp. 78-79). More importantly, it was a critical, debunking book giving rise to the peace and change reform activism that is currently used by peace historians today. Clearly, *Peace or War* was the one book most responsible for shaping the parameters of future peace research in history; it was a work that highlighted the modernization of peace thought due to the socializing tendencies of war itself. Disciples of Curti and later generations of peace historians would focus their educational efforts on the idea of peace as more than just the absence of war.

Peace or War was a pathbreaking work. It legitimized the scholarly emphasis in peace history research. Yet Curti was still troubled by the chilling effects of patriotism. When faced with the dire prospect of "the perpetual dilemma of what to do when the values of peace are in apparent conflict with decency, humanity, and justice," Curti supported the use of force against the twin evils of Nazism and Fascism (Curti, 1973, p. 10). During World War II, however, he continued his research on the ideological origins of American patriotism. In 1946 *The Roots of American Loyalty* appeared. In true instrumentalist fashion Curti argued that the historian as educator should "find and implement instrumentalities for subordinating the more harmful nationalistic sentiments to broader conceptions of human welfare" (1946, pp. 218-219). Only a constructive form of patriotism, one taught in basic school subjects, can prevent leaders from cleverly playing on the emotions of national loyalty and ignorance of other lands to advance militaristic purposes.

In the mid-1960s, following the chilling assault of McCarthyism on domestic civil liberties, the advent of nuclear weapons, cold war fears marked by the recent Cuban Missile Crisis, and the impending war in Vietnam, Curti rallied a number of historians to gather for a meeting in Philadelphia to discuss prospects for promoting the scholarly undertaking of peace research. At the December 1963 meetings of the American Historical Association an ad hoc committee was established which led the following year to the creation of the Committee on Peace Research in History (its name would change over the years and is presently known as the Peace History Society). Over 100 historians responded to the call and in 1966 CPRH was officially affiliated with the AHA and adopted the formal name of Conference on Peace Research in History. The organization's bylaws represented Curti's own activist strain as noted in his pioneering works: "The Conference seeks to communicate its findings to the public at large in the hope of broadening the understanding and possibilities of world peace" (CPRH, 1971-72). In 1969, Curti was elected president and maintained close ties to this scholarly organization, serving on the editorial board of *Peace and Change* and later, at the age of 88 in 1985, contributing his own thoughts on his pioneering role as American's first scholarly peace historian – "Reflections on the Genesis and Growth of Peace History" – to CPRH's journal.

CONCLUSION

When Curti died on March 9, 1996 at the age of ninety-eight he left a rich legacy for peace historians to follow. His work in peace history education developed a number of important themes. As Curti correctly observed, the concern for peace transcends time and place. The goals of peace research must also be focused on the basic causes of war in order to develop meaningful alternatives to violence. In this context, the religious emphasis has been on human nature – greed and aggressiveness outweighing man's capacity for understanding and compassion. The secular approach has attributed war to the failings of the state such as the desire for economic and political power. Careful investigation in these areas must continue and not be abandoned. Finally, an area that remains fruitful for historical investigation has been one not only directed at developing alternatives for preventing wars but also exploring the role peace activists have played in ending them. Here Curti's pioneering studies recorded the efforts of conscientious objectors and passive nonresisters which later historians expanded by exploring the dimensions of nonviolent direction action. Clearly, Curti's historical works examined the common threads among two major groups of antiwar advocates: the absolute pacifists who insist that war is always morally wrong, and the peace-oriented nonpacifists who conceive of war's possibility yet maintain that it is an irrational and inhumane way to solve disputes between nations. His original efforts continue to provide an important scholarly roadmap in the field of peace research in history.

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