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# **Conversations with George S. Counts**

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## Introduction

Two decades ago, I had the opportunity to take a class from George S. Counts. More importantly, I benefited from sharing conversations during early morning walks taken while living at the same location. I once remarked to him that his frequent reference to society's need to find a substitute for the milk cow as a means of teaching responsibility had a significant meaning for me, because even though I had no milk cow, I still got up early enough to milk one, and found that the two of us were the only ones "up and out" at five o'clock every morning on the Michigan State campus. As a single learning opportunity, those early morning strolls and conversations with Dr. Counts were the most significant. He loved to talk and I loved to ask a question and then listen to his lengthy reply. Also, he frequently questioned me about my native South and shared with me his appraisal of what I said.

Dr. Counts was the best teacher I have known. In the notes which follow, I reconstruct two conversations with him from notes I compiled 20 years ago. Reading my notes and recalling my conversations provides me with a flavor of Dr. Counts that I miss when I read his published works and what others write about him. Perhaps it is this individual flavor that is the mark of a unique teacher.

## Notes on Conversations - Question

I can't understand why education is not more influential and better supported since America has historically made a commitment to mass education, and the

people generally have equated education to the success of our form of government.

### Dr. Count's Reply

Review the great realities of the world in which we live. Science and technology have created a society wide in sweep and so complex in creation and so dynamic in function that the average citizen often becomes complacent in discharging the duties that our democratic society assumes that he is capable of doing. You know, the Russians say that such duties must be done by the elite--those whose full-time job is to rule. You are not yet thirty, and you probably won't understand this until you are forty, but the boldest concept of human nature is that man can discharge the duties of citizenship.

There are two great conditions which have always perplexed me. First, organized education is recognized as a great power. But its power has been emphasized by totalitarian states, not my democracies. Secondly, free public schools without doubt are one of the greatest achievements of the American people, but we omit the development of our schools and their purposes from our curricula; we do not include it as a part of our history and our culture. Great historians recognized this, but most historians are not great because the lesson they learn from history is that you can't trust the people; they have little faith in democracy and misinterpret Jefferson's belief in the natural aristocracy of the intellectually elite to mean greater privilege instead of greater responsibility.

We were on the right track at Teacher College but the Great Depression destroyed the spirit of working together--it shook the most fundamental beliefs about the social order and created doubts and radical departures . . . many believed that our form of government would not survive the crisis. The crisis was not solved, it was only delayed by World War II. Most people do not comprehend that our form of government requires that the educational level of the people must equal the level of complexity of duties that the average citizen must discharge.

The two major problems that confront us are human survival and the survival of liberty. The great dilemma is that those who should be most supportive of education for all people tend to be the most severe and damaging critics of public schools. Many of the intellectually elite in universities are contemptuous of public schools, journalists sensationalize them, and business and civic leaders compromise them. Meanwhile, most leaders in the East send their children to private schools. Their children will be poorly prepared for the future of which they will be a part. The perspective that non-supporters or reluctant supporters of public education lack is that while they are precluding the necessary level of education for the people in a democracy, communism is a movement of terrific power and dynamism. U.S.S.R. education is saturated with the triumphs of communism; a textbook includes "the mighty ideas of revolution are winning-- a billion people have won independence from imperialism." You can be sure that the credit goes to the rulers--not just in what they say, but by pictures, posters and by all which educates, not just by schools.

Our hope is that our leaders will fulfill their responsibility to education; our safeguard is that the average citizen has an uncanny love for freedom and liberty, even with little education. The point is that we no longer have the luxury of time to develop our democracy over a period of generations. We are in a race with time and the race won't be won unless we turn around those who know better but don't do better. Literacy is a liberating achievement only with a free and responsible press, free libraries and free bookstores; otherwise, literacy can be a method for molding the minds of the people. We have more freedom than responsibility. The people must establish in their own minds the direct relationship between education and democracy as a way of life. Political leaders are more influenced by the rich people than by the average people, but we are near that point where government will respond to the average citizen. It is harder and harder to appeal to emotion instead of reason. Maybe one more generation is needed.



## Question

Can all, or a vast majority of the people be educated to a level of responsibility? I ask this not in relation to school children, but because I know many people who have been highly educated, but who feel little or no responsibility to the people, or to justice, or to the common need we all have for an educated populace. If we can't be successful with highly intelligent people in teaching responsibility for a democracy, how can we hope to be successful with average or below average people?

## Dr. Count's Reply

Your question is perplexing, but it reflects your naivete about highly intelligent people and also your lack of perspective about the history of civilization.

First of all, great, talented scientists are dedicated to their research to the exclusion of what you believe their other responsibilities should be. Of course, there are not many truly great scientists, but it has become more respectable and rewarding for many very bright people to emulate great scientists and to adopt their peculiarities as marks of distinction. Of course, all great teachers renew themselves and develop their knowledge through research, but the social scientists in many cases have so mimicked the hard sciences that they have forgotten about the people now and in the future. By this I mean that they research the ridiculous trivia at the expense of researching within their discipline for the meaning it has that relates to the lives of people and to civilization. There is a difference between the love of freedom to research and the love of freedom per se for everyone.

High intelligence in one field does not transfer to high intelligence in all fields. This is one of our most dangerous assumptions as a society. When people are overly impressed with my skill in Russian, I remind them that morons in Russia speak Russian. Our greatest hope is in our great scientists and we must support them and coddle them, but we must not

count on them for leadership in the application of knowledge to the betterment of mankind. Chang said that we were bold enough to believe that the benefits of civilization could be made available to everyone because of our brashness and our technology. This may or may not be true, but it is one of our intangible national goals.

People who are rich and comfortable seem to always believe that this condition results from their high intelligence. I doubt that this is true. People who are intelligent and uncomfortable about something other than themselves are the ones who will work for a better world.

The saddest reality is that our social order did not develop along with our technological revolution. There is a world-wide rise in expectations by all peoples in the world. For centuries the peoples of many countries have been conditioned to live on the brink of subsistence--today they have learned about the affluent societies and basically have come to believe that with liberation they will have the same. They place the blame on colonial societies which exploited them. In reality, they have always been exploited, but by different groups. The important point is that their expectations will not be fulfilled immediately. Your challenge in the South is greater but easier, because de jure segregation is more easily denied under democratic principles than is de facto segregation, even though both are equally intolerable.

### Epilog

I find that most of what Dr. Counts talked about 20 years ago is as pertinent today as it was then: (1) technology is out-running education; (2) those who should understand the transcendent purposes of education and the need to support them tend to be destructive and disruptive; (3) too many scholars absolve themselves of responsibility for education; (4) people want more from education than it can deliver; but (5) in spite of all of these realities, education and schooling continues to be more responsive and meet

more of the people each year; and (6) that great backbone of our country--the average citizen--is more active in the debates and deliberations about our future and our governance. As a society, we have not yet found the substitute for Dr. Count's milk cow.