



1938

## American Education, 1938

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### Recommended Citation

Huntington-Wilson, Francis Mairs, "American Education, 1938" (1938). *Documents, 1919-1938*. 93.  
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## Chap 20

### AMERICAN EDUCATION

During the Middle Ages, even the darkest of them, a semblance of civilization, which is, for one thing, discipline, was kept alive by the Church. The fear of Hell and the feeling that, through the Church, Hell could be avoided, was a stabilizing influence. With the decline of belief in Hell to come, there has arisen urgent need for a higher motive to replace fear as a restraint upon evil conduct. The Medaeval teachers were dedicated to reasoning and logic. However fantastic some of their subjects of discussion and some of their dialectic may seem to us, at least they were sincere; and they stimulated reasoned thought. And think of the real search for truth of Aristotle and Plato, of the attempts at education of the ancient Greeks! And then later, when Abelard was in Paris, Paris was the university of Europe. There were not any expensive university buildings, but there was one wise man.

Mr. Van Loon, in a light moment, characterized Gutenberg as the greatest enemy of mankind. His argument was, as I recall, that before the invention of printing any great idea could be written out in only a few copies; and, in the course of years, the wise men of Europe would, through correspondence, distill from it its essential value. He went on to intimate that now the masses, gorged with the ability to read, but lacking the desire to learn, always missed the wisdom of the wise. Worse still, the wisdom of the past was usually read with ignorance of the context, and was often invoked to prove propositions quite contrary

to the theories intended by the originators of those rare things, great ideas.

If this is the effect of the printing press, what then of the telegraph, the radio, the "movies", communication by airplane, and impending television? There has been a fatuous assumption that good ideas would monopolize all these facilities. Aristotle thought that a democratic state must be limited in size to the reach of a man's voice. He thought it would work, because he assumed the leader would be a high-minded one. Many Americans thought that the radio might help democracy to work well; but they assumed that American leadership would always be high-minded. We forgot that bad ideas always travel faster than good ones. We forgot that modern high-speed facilities for communication were sure to become a vehicle of national vulgarization and also a peculiarly handy implement for demagogues.

Julio Camba, a Spanish writer, was brought over here a few years ago, along with ~~many~~ other foreign journalists, by the Carnegie Peace Foundation. This was on the theory that international peace would thus be promoted by international understanding. Mr. Camba had some interesting views on "education". He has a chapter in his book about America in which he stands up for illiteracy as a positive advantage. He notes the fact that the incipient Spanish Republic of a few years ago was going to tackle the matter of illiteracy in Spain. Then he says, "Illiteracy, as a cause of backwardness and barbarianism, is a superstition of our left (radicals). 'Everyone must read', they say. But what is it that they must read? I would ask. For me this

point is of capital importance, and until some one clears it up satisfactorily, I shall vote for illiteracy." Further on he says that "culture" does not diminish anyone's stupidity; and he implies that misplaced education merely destroys originality without supplying anything in its place.

When he cast his vote for illiteracy until he should first be assured the mass of men would read something beneficial, or at least not injurious, Mr. Camba had perhaps been examining life in word and picture as portrayed in about 95% of our magazines exposed for sale everywhere. Doubtless he had noted some of the "funnies"; and certainly the lurid romantization of crime in our press. The advertisements he could hardly escape. And when he saw a false view of life paraded on the screen, or listened to some of the most crazily vulgar of the radio programs, he very likely regretted that even the illiterate could see and hear. Such, in too great measure, is the intellectual and emotional pabulum on which the public mind and spirit feed. It does not help matters if the shrill voice of the crack-pot or malevolent agitator, or of the political charlatan, is one of the few clear notes to penetrate the mental fog.

The saying that the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing-fields of Eton was a great tribute to the old public schools of England. It seems to have referred to a certain physical and moral stamina cultivated in those schools, to a certain stamp of character and devotion imprinted upon the boys who were later to serve the empire. It was this sturdy character, not a smattering of learning, that was important. Their teachers were typically British. From them, and from one another, they learned to distinguish between "what is done" and "what is not done" by an Englishman.

~~gentleman~~. They absorbed an ethic not unlike that set forth by Du Maurier in "Trilby",--the pretty adequate one "To think of others before oneself, and never to lie or be afraid". They absorbed a patriotic point of view, some sense of obligation and service, and a salutary measure of intellectual humility. They gained a vivid picture, from history and from example, of what an Englishman should be and should do. They were cast in a uniform mould, and a very good one. And in no field has this fact proved any obstacle to the fruition and expression of genius or exceptional talent when these existed in the individual.

American educational methods have <sup>proceeded</sup> ~~"gone off the deep end"~~ in the ~~exactly~~ opposite direction. Scant stress has been laid on patterns of conduct and character. Some of our older schools and universities through their traditions, and others through some rare personality on their faculties, impress something of real value to character, ethics, and taste. But most of them are towers of Babel, great or small; and those ready to "die for dear old ~~mother~~" this or that college, would be hard put to it to explain for just what of any <sup>importance</sup> ~~real value~~ their institution stood. To "express oneself", untrammelled by any mould of character or pattern of conduct, seems to be the watch-word. Among teachers, this is called academic freedom. In the urge to express oneself, it appears to be forgotten how comparatively few people are fit for publication; and what a great majority of us require a pattern, a mould, some harness of decent tradition, to guide us among the infinite shams and villanies of life.

Official figures for 1935 show the total number of our so-called colleges and universities to be about 630. These are called

119

the "chief" colleges; and no doubt quite a number of little diploma mills are omitted. Their receipts, excluding additions to endowment, are given as \$611,127,829. for the year 1931-1932. Over a billion and a quarter dollars are in their endowments. Their buildings are valued at somewhat more. Taking census figures for 1931-32, the total investment, including land, buildings and other material assets comes to well over two billions. Private and parochial schools with over two and a half million pupils (32-33) represent a considerable investment and a large number of teachers. For the same year salaries of teachers and superintendents in the public school system came to \$1,265,443,910; and this, added to other charges, made a total of \$2,174,650,555. spent upon public schools in the United States in that year. The total public school staff was 871,607. This works out to an average compensation of about \$1,450., without indicating how meagre the compensation of many teachers may be. There are more than four and a half as many women teachers as men; so that most of the boys, apparently, are to learn manliness from women. Adding to all this the numerous special endowments and foundations and libraries, and considering the colossal investment in public school buildings and equipment, it becomes evident how gigantic is the American educational machine; how vast is the capital it has absorbed; and how huge is the sum that it annually takes from the tax-payers. It is fair to inquire what the taxpayers are receiving in return.

For one thing, higher education has been spread too thin. No country could supply really competent professors for such a ridiculous number of so-called colleges and universities. There is

duplication where there should be amalgamation. Where existing universities should have been strengthened, new ones have been endowed nearby, the result being two fair institutions where there might have been one excellent one. Then, too, higher education has been too unquestioningly turned over to a sort of Brahmin caste of Ph.Ds., without reflection on the fact that that degree is easily within the reach of industrious mediocrity, and that its attainment needs no spark of genius and no aptitude for imparting knowledge, to say nothing of wisdom.

The profession of teaching is not very well paid, but it offers an unusual degree of security and the advantage of long vacations and, in universities, of an occasional sabbatical year of full <sup>leisure</sup> ~~freedom~~; and also a measure of prestige. It draws heavily, as do the law and medicine, upon a "white-collar" population greatly swollen by the displacement of manual labor by the machine, and hard put to it to find a place for itself. Overcrowding of the professional classes is an odd result of technological unemployment that is often overlooked. It lowers the average standard of the professions. And the attempt to force an undue amount of education, of sorts, upon great numbers of persons unqualified for intellectual pursuits further aggravates the situation. How many teachers and students might be good cooks and in that honorable occupation happily contribute to one of the most needed reforms in our country! No doubt the absurd national snobbery in regard to domestic service would be a deterrent.

It is worth recalling that Thomas Jefferson, that great democrat, favored a system under which the "three Rs" should be offered

to all at public expense. A competent and impartial board was to pass upon the qualifications of those wishing to go on from common school to high school. Those wishing to go on from high school to university were to be sifted again by such a board. The idea seems to have been to make the degree of attempted education fit the character and capacities of the individual; and to protect the public from paying for going through the motions of education, beyond the primary stage, in cases of individuals incapable of benefitting by it. Possibly Jefferson realized also that arming vicious cunning characters, or weak and callow ones, with the weapon of that dangerous thing, a little learning, was much like handing fire-arms to potential bandits.

Far the most important part of education is, not the teaching of facts, but the training of the mind and reasoning powers, the imparting of a wholesome view of life, the moulding of fine character, the invitation to a worthy and a patriotic life. True education is necessarily conservative, because the value of the wisdom accumulated by the nation and the world up to a given moment infinitely outweighs that of the "new" ideas of any one generation. There is far more danger of forgetting the wisdom of the past than there is chance of being immune to the latest fad, however fallacious. The awful responsibility of the teacher is to impress upon the younger generation the best of the tradition, the ideals, and the culture of the nation. In this duty he is the agent and the trustee of the older citizens, and of the generations that have gone before. His responsibility is second only to that of the



parent in moulding the citizen of the future. The aim of education should not, of course, be a mind sealed to the new; but it should be a balanced and critical mind, skeptical, analytical, and disposed to cast the burden of proof heavily upon hasty and rash innovation. What is established did not arise by accident, but out of age-long experiment and experience. In moving with a changing culture education should move slowly and warily.

The work of an educator is no enviable one in the din and turmoil and cross-purposes of these days, when the nation needs a moral recovery even more than an economic one. The concept of what a good American should be grows dangerously obscured. Racial, national, or ideological groups, foreign to the spirit of America, have gained undue influence. There is much bad example in high places. The demagogue rants and the communist cunningly bores from within, in every field, including that of education. Rights, never duties, are the cry. Expediency supplants truth. Cynicism, frivolity, and the lazy desire to get something for nothing are in the air.

Youth, entering upon this stage, is not to be envied. If our educational system has not fortified him against all these current poisons, it can hardly be called a success. If it is turning out in great numbers gullible, conceited, and frivolous young people, whose idealism has turned rancid and maudlin, who will be clay in the hands of the first agitator or demagogue, it is indeed a failure; and the public, who pay for it, should take notice. Such education is worse than none, and it points to the doom of democracy.

It has long been common knowledge that the sentimentality, perverted idealism, or bitterness of the "pink", or "parlour

bolshevik", had deluded a good many of our intellectuals and educators. But only in recent years, in the atmosphere created by the New Deal administration, has the red menace become a real one in the United States. Recent testimony before the Congressional Committee to investigate un-American activities would indicate that one university within greater New York had become a hot-bed of communist propoganda, and that many of its professors had been drawn into "the movement". Testimony by an evidently honorable man who had been drawn near to the center of communist activity before he realized where it led, and therefore could speak as an insider, more than confirmed the suspicions of detached observers of the national scene.

Painful evidence of how far some of our educators have strayed from a sound conception of their public duty and responsibility was revealed at the recent convention of the American Educational Association in New York City. At that meeting a professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, delivered an address that amounted to an appeal to the nearly 3,000 teachers present to indoctrinate their pupils with the spirit of class-war. The speaker's remarks (as quoted in the New York Herald Tribune) reveal this teacher of teachers <sup>as</sup> enthusiastic for internationalism, world citizenship, and plenty of government control. It is hard to escape the conclusion that he has drunk deep at the well of Moscow. He seems to conceive the role of the educator, not as that of laboring to turn out fine young American citizens, but as an opportunity to promote internationalism and radicalism; to turn out embittered young people impressed with his own particular prejudices. All this, as usual, is in the name of peace and

democracy. We are told that this strange tirade was cheered enthusiastically by the teacher-delegates present.

"The Left Kidnaps American Youth", an article in "American Mercury" for August, should be read by all boards in control of public education and by the drowsy trustees of our endowed schools and colleges. It convincingly implies that the American Youth Congress (lately asserting its internationalism at Vassar) had previously come under communist and socialist domination, and that the following youth organizations, all "pink" or "red", actively communist or tagging along, had flocked to the previous meeting at Milwaukee:- Young Communist League; Youth Section, American League for Peace and Democracy; Youth Division, International Workers Order; Youth Division, National Negro Congress; Workers' Alliance (that pressure group of radicals among those supported by W. P. A. at public expense); American Student Union; Young Peoples' Socialist League; National Student Federation; Y.W.C.A., National Industrial Council and National Student Council. This is very nice, even if Mr. Browder, head of the American communists, had not told the congressional investigating committee that communist propaganda were penetrating practically everywhere.

The "Mercury" article, and the testimony before the Committee, show also with what fatuity rich or well-to-do people sometimes unwittingly contribute to the communist cause, and help to give it a respectable "front". The outer fringe of those thus exploited are rightly called "innocents". The almost convinced, who are not yet party members, are called "fellow travellers". These are people who go along because of sentimentality, mistaken idealism,

some grudge against society, or just gullibility. There are among them perhaps a few of the rich subconsciously impelled by some vague urge of atonement for the manner in which their riches were acquired.

Certainly neither the educators of America nor the American government have been given any mandate to change American institutions or to encourage inter-group strife instead of friendly co-operation. Yet it is evident enough that a good many of our teachers are following the lead of the New Deal in assuming that such ~~radical and un-American~~ activities are within their province. As to our government's contribution to this new atmosphere, when people like Hopkins, the head of the P. W. A., and Aubrey Williams, his deputy, use their administrative offices for political or for radical propaganda; when they would encourage the youth of the country to organize into pressure groups; when they try to stir up inter-group hatreds, it is about time for normal American citizens to take notice.

On June 27 Mr. Williams, speaking to an organized group of W. P. A. workers, said, "We've got to stick together. We've got to keep our friends in power"-- and much more of the same. A dispenser of the general tax-payers' money to the unemployed, this official sees no impropriety in harranging the most radical group of them in a bitter, radical vein; and in blatantly adjuring them to vote for the New Deal, naturally enough invoking the President's name. July 2, at Cleveland, Mr. Williams, speaking to a planning conference of the American Youth Congress, took a similar tone and

said to his hearers, "You must organize to get power into the hands of the workers." Certainly the American government was founded as one of, by, and for all the people. Minority rights were carefully guarded by the Constitution. Certain high officials of the New Deal would seem to be striving to transform it into some American version of the Russian so-called dictatorship of the proletariat. And it cannot be denied that a good deal that President Roosevelt has <sup>at times</sup> said and done <sup>seems</sup> ~~is~~ faithfully enough reflected in the courses of his most reckless agents.

The educational forces playing upon the emotions, the minds, and the character of American youth are not only what is taught them, through precept and example, by teachers and parents. We see youth made a target for insidious propaganda. Moreover, the actions, examples, and sayings of ~~the most~~ conspicuous members of our government cannot be ignored as a potent factor in that sum total of influences which <sup>makes for</sup> ~~is~~ education. Unfortunately, this factor, under the New Deal, has been lamentable. If we grant, as we must, that truth, prudence, ethical fastidiousness, fair-play, balanced reasonableness, --indeed all the "homely" virtues, <sup>like industry and thrift</sup> --are not obsolete but are still the fundamentals of good character and good citizenship, we cannot but be disturbed <sup>by</sup> the educational influence of the New Deal.

Even a casual discussion of American education should not omit tribute to the work done by surgery and medicine to alleviate human suffering. It is true, of course, that prolongation of the life of the unfit makes no contribution to the strength of the race; and there has not yet been that alliance of eugenics, sex hygiene,

birth control, sterilization of the unfit, and encouragement of fecundity on the part of the fit, that make for a first-class nation. Aside from surgery and medicine, the advantages of scientific progress are <sup>Sometimes</sup> ~~often~~ debatable. Samuel Butler, the contemporary of Darwin (and of Mendel, the founder of the science of eugenics), foresaw the destruction of man by the machine. We see the abuses of science to make war more merciless and lethal and to invent more and more machines to put men out of work, or to make their work more and more ~~uncongenial~~ congenial to them as human beings. The German philosopher, Oswald Spingler, saw, in world-wide technology, and the paucity of good leadership, the decline of the western nations. Altogether, there is a great deal for serious minded statesmen and educators to reflect upon.

Undoubtedly the American educational system includes great numbers of able, wise, and patriotic teachers, who realize that their task today is to arm our youth with sound character and a healthy skepticism as a defense against the intellectual and emotional miasms floating in the air of this period. If they can successfully attack the current gullibility, <sup>they will do the nation great service.</sup> ~~it will be realized that the word "liberal" requires examination. It may mean liberality with tax-payers' money and stinginess with wisdom. "Progress", too, is a dangerous word.~~ Activity is not necessarily progress. It may be retrogression. It is quite possible to progress from bad to worse. Sensible people are not disposed to "try anything once". Leaving that to fools, they try to guide their lives by the road-signs of experience and the wisdom of the past. They are wary of dangerous experiment. In private life, this is

called common sense. In politics, it is called conservatism. And "intellectuals" are not to be taken too seriously. Often they may be defined as people who apply their minds to difficult problems but who, unfortunately, bring little intelligence to the task. ~~minds of~~ Ruthless reasoning <sup>is</sup> ~~are~~ required to resist the falacies of the day. The moulding of such minds is the difficult duty of the teacher.

The vagaries of some of our educators make the task of the majority the more onerous. Among the minority are pacifists who know nothing of the realities of foreign relations; democrats in- sensible to the implications of <sup>direct</sup> ~~untrammelled~~ democracy; friends of <sup>from the beginning</sup> "Loyalist" Spain and of the Russian regime, who overlook all their atrocities and cruelties upon some vague assumption that they <sup>were</sup> ~~are~~ <sup>always</sup> "liberal". Common sense and a decent standard of character and conduct are more important than all the book-learning; and our educators should above all concentrate upon fostering those, by precept and example. Better wise illiterates of good-will than mean and half-learned fools. It is a breach of public trust when educationalists, in whatever category, mistake their honorable mission to turn out young people of good character and discriminating mind for some fanatical notion that they are justified in moulding their pupils to their own prejudices. If we are to have an intelligent and well-meaning citizenry, we must have sound educators, and, if possible, high-minded political leadership.

For tax-payers long to support a government to plunder and demoralize the nation, and an educational system in any measure accessory to the process, through its influence upon the nation's youth, would seem too comic for American sense of humor, even in its present apparent eclipse, insofar as politics and economics are

In every country or community where there exists a coherent and ~~st r~~ strong public opinion, there public opinion is a powerful factor, among all those forces that go to make up the sum total of educational influences. This is one part of education that costs the tax-payers <sup>money</sup> nothing; but they create it and they are responsible for it, for good or evil, or for the lack of it. —

Here in America we find no clear ~~and~~ national purpose, no generally accepted patterns of being and doing. There is a widespread sense of bewilderment and frustration. Most citizens feel like lonely wanderers in a labyrinth of riddles; and few care <sup>about,</sup> or understand, or incommode themselves, for the general welfare of the nation. As a force, public opinion here lacks clear direction. Individuals and groups look upon the nation <sup>al</sup> scene from the view-point of their own fancied interests, their prejudices, or their fads, such as cure-alls like pacificism, the League of Nations, prohibition and many others. As materialists, they are out for all they can get. As theorists, they think "there ought to be a law".

It is somewhat as if a thousand people tried to view a great picture by having each person look at only one square inch of the canvas. Into the eye of each there penetrates a tiny image, meaningless when isolated. The aggregate view is <sup>as</sup> meaningless, <sup>as a mosaic with all the pieces out of place.</sup> The national view is like that, for it is nothing but the conglomeration of millions of small fractional glimpses of the general interests of the whole people. It is therefor a blurred and distorted one. On most questions there is no public opinion, unless it be some incalculable resultant of all these clashing group opinions.

Not only the presence in our midst of too numerous unassimilated, or even unassimilable, elements, but also the excessive individualism of the typical American, militates <sup>mo</sup> gainst a coherent and fairly homogenous public opinion. And the lack of it <sup>as an adjunct to its work,</sup> adds still further to the Herculean labor our educational system is called upon to perform.

To look on life, and the national welfare, as a whole; to understand that cure-alls, arrived at through attempts at over-simplification, are a



delusion; to realize that the obligation to consider others outweighs and limits any license to selfish aims, ~~material or ideological~~ <sup>these are</sup>; to be critically skeptical, but benevolently open-minded, <sup>^</sup> are the sort of thing that are real education, that are the equipment of an educated man. It is a counsel of perfection, an ideal; but ~~aiming-at-a-but~~ the use of sound ideals is to give the right direction to practicable <sup>^</sup> everyday effort. By such high aims our educators can do much to engender an American public opinion that will be their staunch ally in their all-important work of turning out worthy American citizens. No one will begrudge the cost of real education.