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EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

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There is nothing new in “Democracy and the Curriculum”¹ except its almost hysterical confessions of fear and failure. All of its notions about democracy and education were more clearly expressed twenty-five years ago by John Dewey, and have been many times repeated with diminishing clarity of principle and insight, in countless books published by his followers, of late officially organized into the John Dewey Society. But from beginning to end the book trembles with emotion about the threat of fascism, the salvation of democracy, and the urgency of educational reform to meet the crisis.

Others may complain that under the leadership of Teachers’ College in the last quarter century, American schools have failed more and more as educational institutions. They may be surprised however, to learn that these same leaders, reviewing their handiwork, find the school delinquent as social agencies (chapter V). From their point of view, the great reform has not come off. The transformation of the schools into “democratic institutions,” in which children and teachers play together at governing themselves from

¹ Democracy and the Curriculum. Publication of the John Dewey Society, edited by Harold Rugg. New York: Appleton Century Company \$2.75

day to day, remains to be accomplished, or else—the hourly peril of democracy’s collapse! The reformers seem not at all concerned by the fact, now attested by many *scientific* educational surveys, that under their influence the schools have been sufficiently transformed from “academic institutions,” so that basic subject-matters are not mastered and basic disciplines, such as reading, writing and thinking, are not acquired. All parties seem to agree that American education is today an unsavory mess, that something must be done. But what? The practical issue, as I see it, is whether democracy is to be preserved by a true conception of education, or whether education is to be ruined by a false conception of democracy. In other words, is the reform which Dewey started to be undone, or is it to be prosecuted to its bitter end?

Professor Rugg and his colleagues would like to give the impression that only their group is interested in saving democracy and that only the measures they propose can do it. In one sense, they are right, for an individualistic democracy without authority of any sort is not what the rest of us want saved; and a curriculum without any fixed content of intelligible subject-matter or rational discipline is certainly the means proportionate to their end, but not ours. They are so blinded by their fear of fascism, not to mention the shallowness and incompetence of their political philosophy, that it would be impossible to explain to them that their picture of democracy is precisely the one Plato gives of the state which is but one remove from tyranny in its viciousness, and which inevitably falls prey to the demagogue turned tyrant. Their democracy is a society “full of variety and disorder, dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike.” (“Republic,” VIII, 558C and ff.). Reading this book makes one wonder whether Hitler is a more immediate menace than these self-appointed protectors of “the American way of life”; for it is not the principles of Locke, Adams and Jefferson which guide them, but the romantic libertinism of Rousseau. Like Rousseau they are unbothered by their multiple inconsistencies: their love of the fruits of bourgeois, industrial capitalism and their horror at the piracy of laissez-faire; their exaltation of unlimited individual freedom and their demand that individualism be subjected to control, and yet control without submission to authority of any sort. (One can certainly sympathize with the way a good communist would dismiss this hook as pragmatic liberalism scared pink, and revealing its unprincipled opportunism!)

The inconsistencies and confusions of the book make it impossible to report or criticize in detail, short of page by page examination. Instead, let our judgment rest on whether the authors see the consequences of Professor Rugg’s prefatory statement that “this book

has been written in the conviction that government can be democratic only when it is based on the consent of the people—and consent is given only when the people understand. This conception makes government in a democratic society synonymous with education” (x-xi). Clearly, they do not. It is true that a democratic society—in which popular sovereignty is most fully realized because through the discipline of reason men have the authority to govern themselves and gain the freedom of self-government—depends more than any other on education: not on any sort of education, but only the kind which liberates through discipline. How can democracy be served by an educational program which abhors order and discipline in every form; which, while saving that “guidance of immature learners by more mature teachers is the distinctive mark of the educational enterprise” (3), refuses to admit that curriculum can be a prescribed course of study because that would make the teachers authoritarian? The students—those who have not yet been taught enough to be able to learn by themselves, those who have not yet achieved the authority to govern themselves—must share “democratically” in making the curriculum, that is, remaking it from day to day as their interests shift (see chapter XV)

How can an educational program which by its own admission has so far failed to teach the young to read and write and which, further, manifests no interest in such things, prepare for democratic citizenship which requires, above all else, clarity and critical judgment in the processes of communication? Democracy is a community of free men. It rests upon communication freed from propaganda and minds freed from prejudice and passion. How can it be supported by schools which do not aim at a disciplined reason, the only source of freedom in human life? Apparently, even John Dewey is not heeded when he says: “The discipline that is identical with trained power is also identical with freedom. . . . Genuine freedom, in short, is intellectual; it rests in the trained power of thought” (“How We Think,” second edition, pages 87-90).


The crucial error of this book can be simply stated. The difference between a good and a bad society can be seen at once in the way in which each considers education. The bad society makes education serve the State, makes it an instrument of revolution or preserving the status quo. Using education as it uses other political pressures—propaganda, secret police, concentration camps—it misuses education because it misuses men, debasing them to the level of mere means. Democracy can be regarded as a good society only in so far as all its institutions respect the integrity, the sanctity, of human beings. The basic principle of American democracy—that men have sacred rights above the State—forbids the misuse of men

and requires education to serve the state only through serving the welfare of its citizens, not merely as subjects, but as free men.

The question, What is a good education? can be answered in two ways: either in terms of what is good for men at any time and place because they are men, or in terms of what is good for men considered only as members of a particular social and political order. The best society is the one in which the two answers are the same. We honor our American institutions only if we believe that the problem of education in our democracy is solved solely by determining what is good education for all men everywhere. My summary criticism of this book is that its authors fail to see that democracy is not a good state unless it can afford to give its citizens the best education absolutely, not relatively to the needs of the moment; nor do they see that only the best education supports democracy itself. The same education which perfects man's rationality is indispensable to democratic life, and inimical to all forms of tyranny and slavery. These writers so misconceive both democracy and education as to debase both to a level at which the choice between their ideals and those of Hitler *et al.* becomes one between equally vicious extremes.

This book is a monument of all the errors and confusions *which* beset American education and American life today—the denial of reason and philosophy; the contempt for religion and theology; the confusion of authority with autocracy; the materialism of such bourgeois ideals as “plenty,” and “abundance”; the relativism of *mores* substituted for morals; the myth of perpetual progress mediated, of course, by the progress of “social science”; and, most fundamentally, the contradiction, of affirming human rights and denying man distinctive humanity. Though it may be useful as a document in the case against the despoilers of education, I cannot recommend this book for reading because it is so disorderly in structure and so atrociously written that no one who is not inured to the jargon can escape utter bewilderment. In point of style, the chapters by Rugg and Kilpatrick are revealing because their multiple repetitions, their chatty asides, their italicized summaries and cinematic illustrations, show that their authors have learned from long experience how to write for teachers who cannot read.

If democracy and education are to be saved in this country, it will take better thinking about both than this book contains to do it. And better thinking about education will not be done by those whose primary, if not exclusive, concern is with the muddle of contemporary affairs. I do not mean that educators, as citizens, should be indifferent to the political issues of the day. We are all

worried about Hitler and his cohorts, and, as free men we must join in a common cause against them; but if we are physicians or engineers or craftsmen, we all have the obligation to do our own work well and keep it from becoming merely an expression of our worries. Eric Gill has said to artists: “Take care of truth and goodness, and beauty will take care of herself.” There is wisdom here for the teachers: let them take care of education, and democracy will take care of itself. 

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