THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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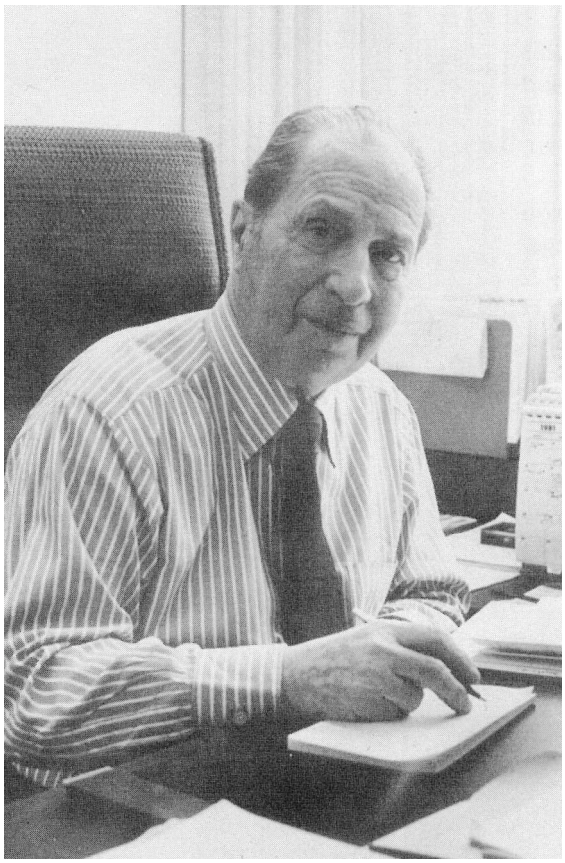

EVERY EXECUTIVE A GENERALIST FIRST AND A SPECIALIST SECOND

Mortimer J. Adler

The cultured generalist has become a vanishing species in all walks of life: Hence, we are witnessing the disappearance of the kind of leadership sorely needed in society today.

Go back a century—before the onset of intense specialization in all fields of endeavor. Ask yourself how people in business and industry were prepared for leadership.

Look into the facts and you will discover that they were all men of *general learning* and, therefore, of *broad vision*—two things indispensable for leadership. They approached problems they were called upon to solve by viewing them in the largest possible context of related concerns, by seeing them in a rich historical perspective, and above all, by focusing on them all the diverse ideas affecting their solution.

How did they get that way? How were industrial leaders prepared for their life's work before the dawn of the 20th century? Not as anyone who has gone to our best schools, colleges and universities is now prepared. We turn out competent specialists today, ever more narrowly and technically trained. But generalists, not at all!

The leaders a century ago—the men who edited great newspapers, built the great industries and ran the great businesses, as well as those who held high offices in constitutional governments, and who became the great physicians, surgeons, lawyers, and engineers—had a different kind of training.

To begin with, they had a general, liberal, secondary schooling. This humanistic education was carried on at a higher level in the colleges and universities they attended. Along the way, they acquired the skills indispensable to effective communication. They knew how to read and write, how to speak and listen, how to use their minds flexibly in dealing with every sort of problem. Their understanding of basic ideas and issues had been cultivated. Above all, they were prepared to go on learning. They were not misled by the preposterous supposition that their education had been completed in school.

Cultural Disease of the 20th Century

The introduction of the elective system at Harvard toward the end of the 19th century changed all this. It occurred as a response to the demands of specialization in the fields of science and scholarship and in the professions as well. The elective system did not take hold and become endemic until the third and fourth decades of this century. But now it has pushed general, liberal, and humanistic learning, first, to the wall, and then, out of our high schools, colleges, and universities. As a result, the cultured generalist has become a vanishing species in all walks of life. Hence, we are witnessing the disappearance of the kind of leadership sorely needed in society today.

That ever more intense specialization has become a necessity in the 20th century goes without saying. We can never return to the simpler conditions of the 19th century. No one in his right mind would say we should. But the specialist who is not also a generalist is a seriously deprived individual—one who cannot provide the kind of leadership needed in all fields of human endeavor—the kind of leadership of which there were so many eminent examples in business before the mid-part of this century.

Are there no remedies for the cultural disease of the 20th century? Can we recover the elements of general, liberal, humanistic learning that all business leaders should possess, while still retaining the benefits of intense specialization that they need under contemporary conditions?

An affirmative answer is not difficult to give, however difficult it may be under present conditions to get the answer widely adopted and put into practice. The answer consists of two main parts.

The first is addressed to fundamental reforms that should be instituted in our primary and secondary schools and in our colleges and universities. The second is concerned with the continued learning that should be sustained through all the years of adult life, since it is absolutely impossible for anyone to become a generally educated human being while still immature and still the ward of an educational institution. Education may begin in school, but it can never be completed there.

Paideia Proposal

The first part of the answer has been set forth in detail in a little book called *The Paideia Proposal,* which I wrote on behalf of some 20 prominent Americans. That book is the result of two years of effort on the part of the group to devise a program of reform for the nation's public schools. It calls for a completely required course of study in the twelve years of compulsory basic schooling, with the elimination of all electives and the elimination of all narrowly particularized job training. That required course of study would initiate general, liberal learning for the young in three ways:

> It would acquaint them with *organized knowledge* in the basic fields of subject matter (language, literature, and other fine arts; mathematics and natural sciences; history, geography, and social institutions):
>
> It would discipline them in all the *fundamental skills* of the

> mind: the linguistic skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening): the mathematical and scientific skills (calculating, estimating, observing, predicting):
>
> It would undertake to enlarge and elevate their *understanding* by the discussion of basic ideas and issues.

The young would thus become liberally schooled generalists before they went on to colleges and universities to become specialists. But since their general learning could not possibly be completed in the first twelve years of schooling, *The Paideia Proposal* recommends that the specialized curricula of undergraduate colleges and graduate and professional schools also should be leavened by some continuation of the same kind of general learning that was begun in pre-collegiate schooling.

Hence, there should be at least one course required for all students in every college running through all four years—a course in which they continue to grapple with basic ideas and issues in seminars devoted to the reading and discussion of important, even great books. Beyond that, every graduate and professional school in our universities should insist that the training of highly specialized practitioners be accompanied and enlightened by a still further continuation of general, liberal learning of a more advanced kind, appropriate to the higher levels of these educational institutions.

Aspen Executive Seminars

Will that suffice? No, for the simple reason given earlier—that no one can become a generally educated human being until full maturity is achieved through all the trials and tribulations of adult life. This brings us to the second part of our answer—the part provided by the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, established in 1950 by Walter Paepcke, then Chairman and CEO of the Container Corporation of America. The Aspen Executive Seminars that were initiated in 1951 had their inception in an insight that Henry Luce of Time, Incorporated, shared with Walter Paepcke in the summer of 1950.

The insight was simply that the leaders of American business and industry, as well as eminent representatives of the learned professions and of government, needed to have their minds opened and refreshed. Whatever learning they had received in their youth—even if it was the very best then available—had almost atrophied by the time they reached the upper echelons of their chosen walks of life. Their basic intellectual skills had become rusty. They were

long on the special uses of their minds to solve their day-to-day practical problems, but short, very short, on the reach of their understanding to basic ideas and issues. They had failed to continue the general cultivation of their minds in the years since they had been graduated from our colleges and universities. The failure was caused by their extraordinary mistake in thinking that their diplomas and degrees certified that they were fully educated human beings.

I have been teaching Aspen Executive Seminars for the last thirty years or more. From that experience, I know how extraordinary are the benefits conferred by just two weeks of reading and discussion devoted to basic ideas and issues, other cultures, and their interrelationships.

In the course of twelve sessions, business executives improve remarkably in their ability to listen and to answer questions, in their ability to communicate clearly with one another, in their ability to read and analyze a difficult text, in their ability to join an issue, arguing cogently for one or another side, and to understand positions that they do not themselves espouse.

Great Ideas

More important is their realization that the great ideas of Western civilization provide the tools for seeing their problems and their world in a new light. And, most important of all, they become a little wiser through their realization that what they should take away from the Aspen seminar is an understanding of the great unsolved problems of the world, not the pat answers that are currently given to them (which lead to simplistic thinking about complex issues).

If they leave Aspen with still unanswered, but answerable, questions plaguing their minds, they will be impelled to do something about the continued improvement of their minds. There is then some hope that they will become truly educated human beings in the years that lie ahead for them—even after they reach sixty!

Let me give some concrete examples to drive home the points just made, first with regard to the skills developed in the Aspen Executive Seminars, and second with regard to the ideas and issues that are dealt with there and the enriched understanding that is gained.

Managers spend a great many hours in business meetings and conferences. I would estimate that more than half of this time is

wasted because the agenda are poorly prepared, because the meetings are poorly conducted, because the participants don't know how to ask the right questions, how to listen to the questions asked, how to respond to them relevantly, how to summarize the steps of the arguments that lead up to one conclusion or another, and how to appraise alternative practical decisions in the light of all relevant considerations. There is not space enough here to summarize even briefly all the rules for doing these things effectively (I have tried to set them forth in a book entitled *How to Speak/How to Listen)*. Instead, let me describe how the rules are put to the test at the Aspen executive programs.

Just last August, I witnessed once again the remarkable change that occurred in business leaders in the course of only two weeks. If the executives could have listened to a tape of what they sounded like during the first two or three sessions and then compared that with their performance during the last two or three, they would have been astounded by the difference. Not only did they speak more clearly and eloquently; not only did they become expert listeners and relevant responders; not only was their thinking more cogent and sustained; but they also faced fundamental issues squarely instead of trying to fudge them, trying to straddle the incompatible horns of serious dilemmas, or, worse, trying to avoid them entirely. In addition, they aimed clear and sharply defined ideas at the bull's-eye of the target, instead of throwing scatter-shots of loose talk and fuzzy conceptions at it.

What issues or problems? The conflict of justice and expediency in dealing with human rights; the difficulties of decision-making; the differences between needs and wants; the indispensability of fortunate circumstances as well as morally good choices in achieving a good life for the individual; and the resolution by justice of the merely apparent conflict between liberty and equality in establishing a good society, one that is economically sound as well as politically right.

What ideas? The ideas already mentioned—justice, liberty, and equality. In addition, such ideas as property, economic and political rights; work that is toil in distinction from work that is leisure, and both in sharp distinction from play or merely amusing one's self; the pursuit of happiness in relation to which pleasure and wealth are merely means, never ends in themselves; and all of the foregoing brought to bear on the understanding of democracy and capitalism as they have emerged in the 20th century and are undergoing significant transformations as we move into the century ahead.

Overcoming the Barbarism of Specialization

The understanding of these basic issues and ideas is achieved at Aspen through the reading and discussion of a relatively small number of critical texts drawn from important books and essays. I have listed some of these and some others in a box attached. All of them should, of course, have been read early in life—in school or college. But even if they had been read for the first time there, they could not have been understood or discussed then in a way only mature men and women, with ample practical experience, can read, discuss, and understand them.

The Aspen Executive Seminars provide one, but not the only, way in which continued general learning can be accomplished. There are many other ways open to leaders and potential leaders who recognize the need to have the broad vision of generalists as well as the technical expertise of specialists, who understand what skills they must possess both to make good human lives for themselves and to discharge their corporate and civic responsibilities.

But none of the diverse ways in which mature men and women can become the generalists they need to be will fully succeed unless general, liberal, and humanistic learning is first restored to our educational institutions. If the requisite intellectual development comes late in the lives of our leaders, it will still be good for them by preparing them to utilize well their years of retirement. But it may be too late for the good of our society, or civilization, and our social and economic institutions.

To prevent the imminent demise of general culture, the barbarism of specialization must be overcome from the time of its onset—in the early years of everyone's life. Every executive should be a generalist first and a specialist second—and be able to be both harmoniously. While becoming a specialist, everyone should continue along a path of general, liberal learning—the only road that leads to wisdom at the end of life.

The ultimate objective of the Aspen Executive Seminar is to enable the participants to come to a better understanding of "democracy" and "capitalism"—the two defining features of the society in which we live; and also to a better understanding of their opposites—"totalitarianism" and "communism"; in order thereby to face intelligently and critically the basic polarizations that confront us in the world today.

To this end, the readings revolve around four fundamental ideas—the ideas of equality, liberty, justice, and property—ideas which are indispensable to our understanding of democracy and capitalism, their opposites, and the issues that result from this opposition.

The aim of the discussions is to get a clearer grasp of these four ideas, in themselves, in relation to one another, and in their bearing on such things as the nature of government, the distinction between constitutional and despotic government, the relation of economic to political democracy, free enterprise, decentralization, and so on. Using the notes that I have made year after year at the end of each day's discussion, I briefly report on the actual content of the eleventh of twelve discussions.

Second Friday (Eleventh Session)

Readings:

Marx and Engels: *The Communist Manifesto, 1848*
Horace Mann: *The Importance of Universal, Free, Public Education,* 1854
Charles H. Vail: *The Socialist Movement,* 1903

We find that Marx and Engels are rigorous in their statement of the labor theory of value: All wealth is produced by labor; the capital instruments used by laborers are themselves nothing but congealed labor; the owner of the capital instruments who does not work himself is totally unproductive and, making no contribution, should receive no part of the wealth produced. Any profit that he takes from the use of his capital is unearned increment and represents an exploitation of labor that is simply thievery.

That, we are able to discover by a close reading of a few pages, is the argument in a nutshell. And in a few paragraphs more, we find: that for all the wealth produced by labor to be enjoyed only by labor, it is necessary to abolish the private ownership of capital, and to turn its ownership over to the community itself, and the collective body known as the state; and the state will then become the sole distributor of the wealth produced, taking, as the slogan goes, from each according to his abilities, and giving to each according to his needs.

There is still a step in the argument that is not sufficiently clear.

We keep asking what it means to say that the capital instruments are congealed labor and that, therefore, they should not be privately owned. The little essay by Charles Vail, an early American socialist, helps us to get a better understanding of this point.

Vail points out that when hand tools were privately produced by the individual workman and privately operated by him in his individual efforts, it was quite proper for such tools to be privately owned, and the fruit of their productivity to be privately acquired. But, Vail goes on, modern industrial capital is socially produced and socially operated. It is socially produced in the sense that the science and technology from which it originates is the product of human society as a whole over the centuries. It is socially operated in the sense that it requires an organized labor force to put it to work. Therefore, Vail argues, being socially produced and socially operated, it should be socially owned—by the collectivity or the state—and the wealth it produces should be socially distributed by the state,

At this point, objections begin to arise from many directions. I will only mention some of the most telling. Is capital socially produced? Are not the science and technology that go into the invention of industrial capital knowledge that exists in the public domain? Is it not like Locke's *common,* open to appropriation by anyone who has enough enterprise and ingenuity to make productive use of it? If so, then that argument against the private ownership of capital fails.

If the capital has been fairly acquired by the enterprise of the capitalist, and if the capitalist then pays laborers the wages they demand as fair compensation for their labor, the production of wealth would seem to involve more than the one factor of labor, in the form of living or congealed labor. It would seem to involve a quite distinct productive factor—capital instruments in the form of natural resources and industrial machinery. The private owner of capital would, then, appear to be a producer, even if he does not work himself; and as a producer he would be entitled to his share of the wealth produced.

With these questions and objections raised, the discussion returns to the text of the *Communist Manifesto* to take note of an inconsistency that opens a new line of thought for us.

On the one hand, Marx alleges that it is the private ownership of the means of production that causes the exploitation of labor and the misery of the proletariat. That being the cause, the remedy is

clear: abolish the ownership of capital. The famous statement of this matter reads as follows:

> The distinguishing feature of Communism is not the abolition of property generally, but the abolition of bourgeois property. But modern bourgeois private property is the final and most complete expression of the system of producing and appropriating products that is based on class antagonisms, on the exploitation of the many by the few.
>
> In this sense the theory of the Communists may be summed up in a single sentence: abolition of private property.

But just one page later, we come upon another statement that we always read aloud in the seminar:

> You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its nonexistence in the hands of those nine-tenths. You reproach us, therefore, with intending to do away with a form of property, the necessary condition for whose existence is the nonexistence of any property for the immense majority of society.
>
> In a word, you reproach us with intending to do away with your property. Precisely so; that is just what we intend.

Do you understand what that implies? It said that less than one-tenth of the population owns the means of production. For the other nine-tenths or more, private property in the means of production has already been done away with by the vast accumulations acquired by a relatively few capitalists.

A moment's thought will discover what is implied; namely, that the cause of economic injustice or inequity is not the private ownership of capital, but rather the concentration of such private ownership in the hands of a few. But if that is the case, rather than private ownership itself, then the remedy is not the abolition of private ownership, but rather overcoming its concentration by diffusing the ownership of capital.

The Marxist remedy is exactly the opposite. The ownership of all means of production by the state is even more concentrated than its ownership by the few under bourgeois capitalism. And at this point we cannot help recalling Tocqueville's prediction of the conse-

quences of concentrating all economic and political power in the hands of the central government and its bureaucrats—a totalitarian state in which all workers may be equal but in which none is free.

If the ideal is the classless society, or at least a society devoid of serious class conflicts, and one the members of which are not only equal but free, then, surprising as it may seem, it is the American educator, Horace Mann, not Karl Marx, who gives us the formula for achieving the ideal. It is expressed in a single line in the little essay that is part of our reading on this occasion:

> Capital and labor in different classes are essentially antagonistic; but capital and labor in the same class are essentially fraternal.

What that suggests is a republic in which all the citizens derive their income partly from the profits of capital and partly from the wages of labor: every man both a citizen and a capitalist, in an economy that preserves private property and free enterprise.

The discussion has now reached the point where it is possible to distinguish four forms of capitalism, and then to ask which of these forms is most supportive of political democracy and individual freedom. The four forms can be named and briefly described as follows.

Bourgeois or 19th-century capitalism, which now exists only in such backward countries as Saudi Arabia or Bolivia and in which the ownership of capital is in the hands of the very few, with little or no participation by the many in economic welfare.

State capitalism, otherwise known as communism, in which the state owns all the means of production and distributes the wealth in such a way that all participate to some extent in the general economic welfare.

Socialized capitalism, or the mixed economy, as we know it in the United States, in England, in the Scandinavian countries, and so on, in which there is both a private sector and a public sector, some degree of private ownership and free enterprise, accompanied by elaborate government measures to ensure a welfare distribution.

Diffused or universal capitalism, the economy that is implicit in the formula proposed by Horace Mann, but does not yet exist, in which participation in the general economic welfare would he achieved by the ownership of capital rather than by welfare meas-

ures controlled and operated by the central government.

The question to be answered is: It you had your choice, which of these four forms of capitalism would you prefer as the economic underpinning of political democracy? Which do you think would establish both political and economic equality without sacrificing either political liberty or individual freedom? 🕮

Must Reading for the Educated Executive

Plato: *Republic,* Books I and II

Aristotle: *Politics,* Book I, *Ethics,* Book I

John Locke: *On Civil Governmen*t, esp. Chapters 1-5

Rousseau: *The Social Contract*, Book I

The Declaration of Independence

The Constitution of the United States

The Federalist Papers, Numbers 1-10

Alexander Hamilton: *Report on Manufacturers*

John Calhoun: *On Constitutional Government*

Alexis de Tocqueville: *Democracy in America*

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

John Stuart Mill: *Representative Government, On Liberty*

William Graham Sumner: *The Challenge of Facts*

Theodore Roosevelt: *The New Nationalism—The Progressive Party Platform of 1912*

Louis Kelso and Mortimer Adler: *The Capitalist Manifesto*

John Strachey: *The Challenge of Democracy*

Published in New Management, 1, Graduate School of Busi-

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