



**José Ortega y Gasset**  
(1883-1955)

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## ORTEGA, *THE* EDUCATOR OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Lecture by **Mortimer J. Adler**

### *Introduction*

I would like to begin by stating three penetrating insights by Ortega that, in my judgment, justify the title of this address.

The first insight is set forth in Chapter 8 of *The Revolt of the Masses*. The title of that chapter tells the whole story: “The Barbarism of Specialization.” The chapter, thus titled, points out that the besetting cultural disease of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an illness nigh unto death, is the ever-increasing specialization that abounds on all sides in our institutions of higher learning, that has seeped down into the schools below them, and that dominates the practice of all the learned professions, of all branches of scientific research, and all scholarly disciplines. It is unrelieved and unleavened by general, humanistic learning.

The second major insight is Ortega's correct understanding of the humanities as identical with a humanistic or generalist approach to all branches of subject matter and all fields of learning. The opposite and woefully erroneous view dominates the educational scene today. It views the humanities as a group of special departments in the university, such as language, literature and the fine arts, and including history, philosophy, and religion, in contradistinction to which are the departments we call the natural and social sciences.

While there is a difference in the two sets of subject matters, there is no difference at all between the approach that is made to them. In both cases, the approach is that of, the specialist, the scholarly or scientific expert in the field. C.P. Snow's much touted conflict between two cultures is superficial as compared with the conflict between true culture—the humanistic culture of the generalist—and the antipathy of culture represented by both the specialization of the sciences in our universities and also by the equally specialized scholarship of the departments misnamed “the humanities.”

Ortega's view—the only correct view—asserts that there are two approaches to any body of subject matter or field of learning: the generalist and the specialist approach. Both, in his view, are necessary and legitimate, but the generalist approach should take precedence over the specialist approach, because it is for everybody, not just for some. Not everyone should be a physicist or a biologist or an historian but everyone should have some understanding of the physical world, the world of living organisms, and the development of human institutions.

*The Mission of the University* expresses this distinction plainly by explaining the difference between becoming a competent physicist through the study of that science and becoming a generally educated human being by acquiring some understanding of the physical world. The Latin equivalent for the Greek word “*paideia*” is “*humanitas*.” It is this meaning of “*humanitas*” as a synonym for “*paideia*” which should control our understanding of the humanistic approach to education as the approach of the generalist, not that of the specialist.

The third of Ortega's insights that I wish to mention and praise is not as clear as the other two in his published writing, for there we can find traces of an elitism that was natural to the man and his time. Nevertheless, overcoming those traces, is his explicit declaration in *The Mission of the University* that the general education of all, including the working classes, should be the primary aim of

our educational institutions in a democratic or mass society. Secondary to that should be the specialized preparation of the few for the learned professions, the sciences, and the scholarly disciplines.

The point just made was confirmed many years later when Ortega, after taking part in the Goethe Festival at Aspen, Colorado, in the summer of 1949, wrote a letter to Walter Paepcke, in the Autumn of that year, recommending that Mr. Paepcke create at Aspen what Ortega called “a high school of the humanities,” which should aim to cultivate the minds of the young before they went on to one or another kind of specialized study in American colleges and universities.

I will return later to further comments on this letter, pointing out how its recommendation underlies *The Paideia Proposal* and also how it led to developments at Aspen that Ortega did not have in mind, but which, nevertheless, he would have completely approved.

*The Paideia Proposal* was dedicated to three American educators—Horace Mann, John Dewey, and Robert Hutchins—but, had we looked beyond our shores, we would certainly have dedicated it to Ortega.

### *Elaboration of these Insights*

When Ortega proposed in 1949 the establishment at Aspen of an Institute of Humanities, he did not have in mind anything like the Aspen Executive Program or anything like the educational reforms outlined in *The Paideia Proposal*. Both of these things, as I shall try to point out, represent Ortega’s influence on American educational innovations and reforms.

In Chapter 8 of *The Revolt of the Masses*, Ortega explained, as early as 1930, why these reforms and innovations were necessary to preserve culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In that chapter, entitled “The Barbarism of Specialization,” Ortega wrote of the scientist who “is only acquainted with one science, and even of that one only knows the small corner in which he is an active investigator. He even proclaims it as a virtue that he takes no cognizance of what lies outside the narrow territory specially cultivated by himself, and gives the name ‘dilettantism’ to any curiosity for the general scheme of knowledge.” Ortega referred to him and to other narrowly trained specialists or professionals as “learned ignoramuses”—learned, but uncultured. “Anyone who wishes,” Ortega went on to say, “can observe the stupidity of thought, judgment, and action shown today

in politics, art, religion, and the general problems of life and the world by the ‘man of science,’ and, of course, behind them, the doctors, engineers, financiers, teachers, and so on.”

As a result of an excessive specialization that is not balanced by general education, we have today, Ortega declared in 1930, more scientists, scholars, and professional men and women than ever before, but many fewer cultured human beings.

The central mission of the university, according to Ortega, is not discharged by the training of scholars, scientists, and members of the learned professions. While it should perform these functions, these are, in Ortega’s judgment, secondary.

The primary function of our institutions of higher learning is to civilize the citizens of a democratic society by introducing them to the essentials of their culture. “Culture,” Ortega wrote, “is the vital system of ideas of a period.” It is not to be identified with science, though science is one component of it.

“Compared with the mediaeval university,” Ortega declared, “the contemporary university has developed the mere seed of professional instruction into an enormous activity; it has added the function of research; and it has abandoned almost entirely the teaching or transmission of culture.” As a result, Ortega went on to say, most Europeans today “are *uncultured*. They are ignorant of the essential system of ideas concerning the world and man, which belongs to our time.”

Today, he continued, the citizen “is the new barbarian...This new barbarian is above all the professional man, more learned than ever before, but at the same time more uncultured—the engineer, the physician, the lawyer, the scientist.”

Until the fall of 1978, I made the mistake of supposing that the educational reforms suggested by Ortega should be made at the level of the college or the university. That mistake was then corrected. In the fall of 1978 the Paideia Group was established and the most important correction that it made in all these proposals for the reform of our educational institutions consisted in proposing that they should be achieved at the level of compulsory schooling, the first twelve years of schooling that are common to all, not the optional advanced schooling that occurs in our colleges and universities which is still the privilege of the few.

If I had read Ortega’s 1949 letter to Walter Paepcke more care-

fully, I would have realized the significance of the fact that he did not there propose a *college* of the humanities at Aspen, but rather, in his own words, “a *high school* of the humanities.” College and university are too late in the lives of the young to be the place for the cultivation of their minds by general, humanistic learning. That must be accomplished at a much earlier age, not just in high school, the last four years of basic schooling, as Ortega suggested, but in all twelve years of basic schooling. After that, some can go on to college for specialized training or preparation for the professions, for science, for scholarship, or for specialized, technical vocations.

### *Further Documentation*

I will postpone until the conclusion of this address a brief summary of *The Paideia Proposal* as an adaption and extension of Ortega’s fundamental views on what education should be in our kind of mass society. Right now, I cannot refrain from quoting six passages from *The Mission of the University*—passages that do more than confirm everything I have said so far. Here they are.

*First:*

‘General culture.’ The absurdity of the term, its Philistinism, betrays its insincerity. ‘Culture,’ referring to the human mind and not to stock or crops, cannot be anything else but general. There is no being ‘cultured’ in physics or mathematics. That would mean simply to be *learned* in a particular subject. The usage of the expression ‘general culture’ shows an underlying notion that the student ought to be given some ornamental knowledge, which in some way is to educate his moral character or his intellect. For so vague a purpose, one discipline is as good as another, among those that are more or less indefinite and not so technical—like philosophy, or history, or sociology!

But the fact is that if we go back to the medieval epoch in which the university was created, we see clearly that the relic before us is the humble remains of what they constituted higher education, proper and entire.

*Second:*

What is called ‘general culture’ today was something very different for the Middle Ages. It was not an ornament for the mind or a training of the character. It was, on the contrary, the system of ideas, concerning the world and humanity, which the man of that time possessed. It was, consequently, the repertory

of convictions which became the effective guide for his existence.

*Third:*

Culture is the *vital* system of ideas of a period. It makes not a particle of difference whether these ideas, or convictions, lie partly or wholly in the province of science; but in other cultures this has not been the case, nor is it decreed anywhere that in ours it will always be so to the same degree as at present.

Compared with the medieval university, the contemporary university has developed the mere seed of professional instruction into an enormous activity; it has added the function of research; and it has abandoned almost entirely the teaching or transmission of culture.

It is evident that the change has been pernicious. Europe today is taking its sinister consequences. The convulsive situation in Europe at the present moment is due to the fact that the average Englishman, the average Frenchman, the average German are *uncultured*: they are ignorant of the essential system of ideas concerning the world and man, which belong to our time. This average person is the new barbarian, a laggard behind the contemporary civilization archaic and primitive in contrast with his problems, which are grimly, relentlessly modern.

*Fourth:*

Civilization has had to await the beginning of the twentieth century, to see the astounding spectacle of how brutal, how stupid, and yet how aggressive is the man learned in one thing and fundamentally ignorant of all else. Professionalism and specialism, though insufficient counter-balancing, have smashed the European man in pieces; and he is consequently missing at all the points where he claims to be, and is badly needed.

*Fifth:*

Let us cast away once for all those vague notions of enlightenment and culture, which make them appear as some sort of ornamental accessory for the life of leisure. There could not be a falser misrepresentation. Culture is an indispensable element of life, a dimension of our existence, as much a part of man as his hands; but that is no longer simply man: it is man crippled. The

same is to be said of life without culture, only in a much more fundamental sense. It is a life crippled, wrecked, false. The man who fails to live at the height of his times is living beneath what would constitute his right life. Or in other words, he is swindling himself out of his own life.

We are passing at present, despite certain appearances and presumptions, through an age of terrific *un-culture*. Never perhaps has the ordinary man been so far below his times and what they demand of him. Never has the civilized world so abounded in falsified, cheated lives.

*Sixth:*

...If one believes it is right, as I do, to offer the knowledge of the university to the working man, it is because one considers this knowledge valuable and desirable. The problem of universalizing the university rests upon the previous determination of what the higher learning and instruction are to be. And second, the process of making the university accessible to the working man is only in small part the concern of the university; it is almost wholly the business of the state. Only a great reform of our state will make our university effective.

### *The Paideia Proposal*

I turn now to *The Paideia Proposal*, published in 1982, and to the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, which was brought into existence in 1950 as a result of Ortega's letter to Paepcke—two things that represent, in my judgment, the richest fruit of Ortega's seminal insights about what education should be in our twentieth century society.

The last of the six quotations from *The Mission of the University* is the germ of the revolutionary idea that is central to *The Paideia Proposal*—namely, that a general, humanistic education should not be the privilege of the few or of an elite, but that it should be the possession of all citizens in our republic—the working classes as well as the professional classes.

Compulsory basic schooling should run through twelve years on a single track, *The Paideia Proposal* insists. It should aim at the same objectives for all and be of the same high quality for all; and that same quality should be totally nonspecialized, totally nonvocational (in the sense of not preparing for particular jobs). It should be, instead, *paideia* or *humanitas* through and through—a general-

ist and humanistic approach to learning.

Extending Ortega's 1949 recommendation of "a high school of the humanities," we propose that all of basic schooling, elementary as well as secondary, should be humanistic, general, and liberal throughout. The course of study should be a required course of study for all, with only one elective, the required election of a second language.

With regard to higher institutions of learning, college or university, *Paideia* also follows Ortega's lead. Such high institutions should have three objectives, Ortega tells us: (1) the transmission of culture; (2) the teaching of the professions, and (3) scientific research and the training of scientists. Of these, the first is primary and mandatory.

In *The Paideia Proposal*, one chapter on higher learning attempts to carry out Ortega's recommendation. I quote its concluding paragraphs:

Those going to college to prepare themselves for vocations requiring specialized knowledge and technical training should be able to choose among a wide variety of programs. But, in addition to such elective majors, there should be for all a required minor course of study that will carry them to levels of general, liberal, and humanistic learning beyond what they received in their basic schooling.

Those going to college exclusively to advance their general education should seek institutions that offer college programs devised to satisfy this purpose. Too few such institutions now exist; they constitute the exception rather than the rule. We need more college programs in which the major course of study offered is common to all, with but few if any electives permitted. Such colleges would be ideal institutions for the preparation of the teachers to staff our reformed basic schools.

To overcome the specialization that now abounds on all sides, it may be necessary for our graduate and professional schools, at the university level, to leaven the intensity of the specialization they demand by carrying general learning forward at still higher levels.

That our technologically advanced industrial society needs technically trained specialists is beyond question. Intense specialization is always necessary for the advancement of learning

in all the learned professions, and in diverse fields of science and scholarship. We cannot turn our backs on these essential needs. Nor can we return to an earlier epoch when such intense specialization was not needed.

But we can and should do something to mitigate the barbarism of intense specialization, which threatens to be as destructive in its own way as the abandonment of specialization would be. We can reconceive the role and offerings of our colleges and universities, made possible by the time saved and the skills acquired that reformed basic schooling will provide.

We need specialists for our economic prosperity, for our national welfare and security, for continued progress in all the arts and sciences, and in all fields of scholarship. But for the sake of our cultural traditions, our democratic institutions, and our individual well-being, our specialists must also be generalists; that is, generally educated human beings.

There is only one important point in *The Paideia Proposal* for which I cannot find the background in Ortega's educational writings, though it is probably there. It is the point that educational institutions at their very best—a best that they have so far never attained—cannot succeed in educating human beings, because youth, the age at which all institutionalized learning takes place, is an insuperable obstacle to becoming educated.

Education is a life-long process, one that reaches its fruition only in our maturer years, in the latter part of anyone's life. Therefore, all schooling must prepare for the continuation of learning in adult life, and learning must be continued throughout the years of adult life if anyone is to become a truly educated human being.

Let me quote the relevant passages from *The Paideia Proposal* on this crucial point:

Only through trials of adult life, only with the range and depth of experience that makes for maturity, can human beings become educated persons. The mature may not be as trainable as the immature, but they are more educable by virtue of their maturity...

The various stages of schooling reach terminal points. Each can be completed in a definite term of years. But learning never reaches a terminal point. As long as one remains alive and healthy, learning can go on—and should...

The ultimate goal of the educational process is to help human beings become educated persons. Schooling is the preparatory stage; it forms the habit of learning and provides the means for continuing to learn after all schooling is completed.

For some, this preparation ends with the completion of basic schooling, amounting to about twelve years. For others, it means the completion of advanced schooling, which may take another four years or more. For all, schooling completed means that education has been begun, but not finished. Schooling, basic or advanced, that does not prepare the individual for further learning has failed, no matter what else it succeeds in doing.

Even if Ortega's educational insights did not include this important point, his 1949 letter to Walter Paepcke resulted in the establishment of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. Its educational programs, developed during the last thirty years, provide the ideal kind of continued learning that all adults must engage in if they are to become truly educated human beings.

The educational reforms I have described as carrying out the essence of Ortega's insights and recommendations are indispensable for the health and prosperity of a democratic society and one that is also advanced in technology and is highly industrialized. Ortega fully understood this.

On this concluding point, let me quote the concluding paragraphs of *The Paideia Proposal*.

Our country faces many insistently urgent problems, on the solution of which its prosperity and even its survival depend—the threat of nuclear war, the shrinking of essential resources and supplies of energy, the pollution or spoilation of the environment, the spiraling of inflation accompanied by the spread of unemployment.

To solve these problems, we need resourceful and innovative leadership. For that to arise and be effective, we must have an educable people. Trained intelligence, in followers as well as in leaders, holds the key to the solution of the problems we face.

Achieving peace, prosperity, and plenty could put this country on the edge of becoming an earthly paradise, but only a much better educational system than now exists can carry us across the threshold.

Without it, a poorly schooled population will not be able to put to good use the opportunities afforded by the achievement of the general welfare. Those who are not schooled to enjoy the blessings of a good society can only despoil its institutions and corrupt themselves.

I cannot refrain from adding one more quotation. It consists of the concluding sentence in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

The nations of our time cannot prevent the conditions of men from becoming equal; but it depends upon themselves whether the principle of equality is to lead them to servitude or freedom, to knowledge or barbarism, to prosperity or to wretchedness.

The alternatives are crystal clear, and it is equally clear that only the educational reforms to be undertaken under Ortega's inspiration will achieve the good as opposed to the evil results of democracy. 

*(Given at the publication of The Paideia Proposal in 1982 and the many references to the Aspen Institute, the lecture may well have been given at the Aspen Institute in 1983 - Archivist's Note)*

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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