
THIS PRE-WAR GENERATION

MORTIMER ADLER

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IV

There are two misconceptions I wish to avoid. The picture I have painted is black enough but it is not utterly so. It must be qualified in the first place, by recognizing that there are a few teachers on every campus who take their stand against the tide; and in the second place, by acknowledging that most college students are at heart good boys and girls. (So, may I add, were Hitler's boys and girls.) It is sometimes difficult to decide whether they think sophisticatedly or only talk that way, but it is easy to discover that their sophisticated speech masks a kind of natural goodness. Let me report some of my own experiences to illustrate these points.

For some years now at the University of Chicago President Hutchins and I have been teaching courses in which the students are asked to read great works in ethics, economics, and politics. They have already had enough education to be suspicious of Plato and Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas and John Locke. They react at once against these, or any other authors, who write as if truth could be reached in moral matters, as if the mind could be convinced by reasoning from principles, as if there were self-evident precepts about good and bad. They tell us, emphatically and almost unanimously, that "there is no right and wrong," that "moral values are private opinions," that "everything is relative."

This is not the picture of one class, but of many. What is impressive is the uniformity of our experience during the past ten years in teaching high school students, college students of all classes, graduate students drawn from various divisions of the university. We have found the same thing in trying to teach the philosophy of law to future lawyers and the philosophy of education to future teachers. Nor should it be thought that the reaction is elicited by the

books we assign, that it merely signifies the students' suspicion that we are doctrinaire Aristotelians or Thomists, or something equally bad. It happens as readily in reading Rousseau, who tries to prove republicanism from the rights of man; or in reading *The Federalist Papers*, along with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; for those fellows also talked about self-evident truths and used such words as "liberty" and "happiness" as if they had some meaning. And for those who suppose that American colleges are hotbeds of radicalism, let me say that the same thing happened when we asked them to read Karl Marx's *Capital*. We tried to show them how Marx had proved the injustices inherent in the historic processes of capitalism. They resisted, not because they could answer Marx's arguments, but because they initially rejected the very notion that a moral judgment about capitalism, or anything else, can be proved.

Yet, I say, these same boys and girls are good at heart. We revealed their hypocrisy to them one day when they accidentally displayed their devotion to ideals. The subject was education in relation to the state. For the sake of clarifying a point in Aristotle's *Politics* on the statesman's use of education, Mr. Hutchins took the position that education cannot improve the community, that education will never serve the cause of social progress. He argued that the aims of education are always determined by *existing* moral and political standards, and hence one cannot hope for educational change to raise the general morale. Apart from the merits of the argument, the interesting fact is that the students were plainly shocked by such pessimism. They *hoped* that education could make men better and uplift society. This hope, we pointed out, was inconsistent with everything else they had been saying. They who had been denying objectivity to the distinction between better and worse were now affirming the possibility of progress, of human betterment. They had been taken off guard by Mr. Hutchins's apparent turnabout and, for the moment, betrayed a strain of natural aspiration. Deep down in their hearts they still wished to believe there was some meaning to "better" by which progress in human affairs could be measured. But when faced with the implications of such belief, they refused, albeit with some embarrassment, to concede that reason could require all men to acknowledge such things to be true. Here was a new hypocrisy. The old-fashioned hypocrite paid lip service to moral maxims which his conduct flouted. These youngsters appeared to have some love for the good; they might even act accordingly; but except in unguarded moments, their sophisticated minds prevented them from speaking accordingly.

Whoever says that it makes no difference what people think or how they speak so long as their hearts are in the right place, commits a dangerous fallacy. One hypocrisy is as bad as the other; if anything, this one is worse because, when right feelings are not supported by right thinking, good men can be insensibly corrupted. Men of good will are not just sweet-tempered animals, but beings whose desires aim at a good they rationally apprehend as such. When the mind refuses to *see* the good and the bad of things, repudiating any moral quality in things and actions to see, the will is blind, and blindly attaches itself to this or that through natural instinct, waywardness, or caprice. Not rooted in reason, such attachments are impermanent. They can be easily uprooted by those who are skilled in playing Pied Piper to the passions. That is why I dread the instability of a generation which, at best, will only have “faith” in democracy—but no sure reasons for upholding it as *objectively* the best form of political community. If their “faith” in democracy amounts to nothing more than well-disposed feelings at the moment, change of circumstances may alter the direction of their sentiments and they may find themselves with a faith in fascism or the same thing by another name.

Let me illustrate the inconsistencies and confusions which result from the divorce of head and heart, by a few tales out of school about my colleagues, the teachers of this prewar generation. On one occasion last spring an eminent professor of history at the university took the position in after-dinner conversation that, while he didn't *like* Hitler, no one could *prove* that he was wrong. I tried to argue that I could demonstrate—demonstrate as certainly as Euclid could a theorem in geometry—that totalitarianism is intrinsically unjust; but in vain, for the professor of history replied that any demonstration I might make would be valid only in terms of its premises, and, obviously, my premises would be my arbitrary assumptions. Hitler need not grant them; he could make others, and prove the opposite case as well. Nondemocratic political systems could be just as valid as non-Euclidean geometries. I did not succeed in convincing him that moral thinking, unlike geometry, does not rest on postulates. but commands assent to its conclusions because they are drawn from self-evident first principle traditionally known as the natural moral law. The historian denied self-evident truths; what looked like them were just verbal tautologies, word magic. He smiled at the notion of a natural moral law; there were just primitive urges which could be rationalized in different ways. My historian was a democrat “by faith”—by the way he felt at the time. It is easy enough to imagine how a change of heart might be forced on him; his mind would present no obstacle to such change.

On a later occasion I was dining with the local authority on international law and a professor of medicine. It was shortly after the Nazi invasion of the Low Countries. Both my colleagues were hot under the collar about American isolationism. They wanted immediate action in support of the Allied cause. What was that cause? I asked. It was the cause of democracy, our cause, and we must act at once. At the time those were my sentiments too, but I soon discovered that I could not make common cause with my colleagues. After dinner I reported the conversation I had had with the professor of history, and again I said that I thought the political truth of democracy could be demonstrated. *No such thing!* Democracy could be saved by force of arms but it could not be proved by weight of reason. The professor of international law told me that his “preference” for democracy was simply a cultural bias, arising from “postulates” which could not themselves be examined for truth or falsity. That we Anglo-Saxons accepted them, that Italians and Germans rejected them, was simply an inscrutable fact, a historic accident. The professor of medicine spoke similarly: outside the domain of natural science there is only opinion; each man systematizes his opinions in a certain conceptual frame of reference, there is the democratic frame of reference, the Nazi frame of reference, and so on. I knew the impossibility of plumbing this argument to its depths. That would mean challenging the scientism, which made my colleagues skeptical about morality. I simply said that I might be willing to fight for democracy as a political good I could rationally apprehend, but that I wouldn’t move an inch to make the world safe for a cultural bias, a set of postulates, or a frame of reference.

This prewar generation has been made what it is by its teachers—these colleagues of mine, justifiably respected in their special fields, yet undermining all the merits of their teaching by a false philosophy, the destructive doctrine of positivism. But the blame should not fall entirely on the colleges and universities. The corruption begins at the lower levels, long before the student becomes sophisticated in semantics or learns about the ethnocentric predicament. The public school system of the country, at both elementary and secondary levels, whether explicitly “progressive” in program or not, is Deweyized in its leadership. I use the name of Dewey to symbolize what Lewis Mumford describes as pragmatic liberalism—a liberalism “so completely deflated and debunked” that it forsakes all the “essential principles of ideal liberalism: justice, freedom, truth” and hence disavows a rationally articulated moral philosophy; supposing instead that “‘science,’ which confessedly despises norms, would eventually supply all the guidance necessary for human conduct.” Public education in the United States is run by men and women who have been inoculated with

pragmatic liberalism at the leading schools of education (Columbia, Chicago, Harvard, etc.) where fundamental policies are formed. Mr. Mumford has done yeoman's work in castigating his old friends on the *New Republic* and *Nation*, but it is much more important to change the mind behind the school system of the country than the minds of the readers of the so called liberal weeklies.

Mr. Hutchins and I discovered what that mind was like when we taught a course in the philosophy of education last year. It was taken by men and women who were candidates for the Ph.D. in education many of whom were already in responsible teaching or administrative positions. We began with this definition: "Education is the process whereby the powers of human nature become developed by *good* habits." I have italicized the word "good" because that, as usual, was the stumbling block. The class objected to the definition as normative; the *science* of education must be objective. Some of them said there was nothing good or bad about education, and others shocked us even more by suggesting that education might just as well be a development of bad habits. The argument went on for days, requiring us to get down to fundamentals. In the course of it we discovered that these professionals in education had been thoroughly indoctrinated with scientism and positivism. The mark of indoctrination was that they really couldn't defend their position; the marks of the doctrine they had swallowed were the familiar denials—of the objectivity of moral standards, of the rationality of men, of any method for answering questions except that of empirical science.

If the teachers of the country, and more than the teachers, their higher-ups, are in this state of mind, can we expect the present generation to be otherwise? Mr. MacLeish may think that those who write a country's novels are more influential than those who make its laws. I think that those who teach its youth are more, immeasurably more influential than either.

V

Can anything be done about American education? I doubt it. The college presidents who expressed such deep concern about American youth last June do not, for the most part, see educational failure itself as the major cause of their condition. If they remember their commencement addresses they may open college with a renewed effort to inspire "faith in democracy," to appeal for a purely emotional loyalty to the nation in time of stress. As the emergency increases there may be talk of military training and similar

expedients for immediate preparedness. But of that long-term preparedness which consists in fundamental educational reform there will be nothing. College presidents will not try to fight the enemy in their midst—the destructive doctrines which dominate American education today—because they do not recognize this enemy, or worse, they belong in his camp. President Conant, for example, has been one of the most vocal exponents of intervention. He urges us to fight for democracy. But he has never affirmed—and being a scientist, is not likely to see the need for—an independent metaphysics, without which ethics and politics have no rational foundation. In consequence, his educational policy involves no challenge to scientism and positivism in all corners of the Harvard curriculum.

One college president has issued that challenge again and again. He too spoke about preparedness last June. But he was thinking of a basic intellectual reform as indispensable to safeguarding democracy from dissolution, as well as from attack by force. He said:

In order to believe in democracy we must believe that there is a difference between truth and falsity, good and bad, right and wrong, and that truth, goodness, and right are objective standards even though they cannot be experimentally verified. They are not whims, prejudices, rationalization, or Sunday school tags. We must believe that man can discover truth, goodness, and right by the exercise of his reason, and that he may do so even as to those problems which, in the nature of the case, science can never solve... Political organization must be tested by conformity to ideals. Its basis is moral. Its end is the good for man. Only democracy has this basis. If we do not believe in this basis or this end, we do not believe in democracy. These are the principles which we must defend if we are to defend democracy.

Are we prepared to defend these principles? Of course not. For forty years and more our intellectual leaders have been telling us they are not true. They have been telling us in fact that nothing is true which cannot be subject to experimental verification. In the whole realm of social thought there can, therefore, be nothing but opinion. Since there is nothing but opinion, everybody is entitled to his own opinion... If everything is a matter of opinion, force becomes the only way of settling differences of opinion. And, of course, if success is the test of rightness, right is on the side of the heavier battalions.

But President Hutchins will not succeed in changing education at Chicago for the same reason that it will not be changed in most of our institutions. The faculties, by and large, see the other way. They are (and perhaps no one else can be) the ultimate guardians of the curriculum, the oracles of its content. That being so, I doubt if


anything short of a major cataclysm or a miracle could work the transformation.

We have some reason to be wryly optimistic about the cataclysm. If we are forced to fight, we will; in that eventuality young men will join the colors or be drafted. But we may be forced to defend democracy without the violence of arms, and to defend it against interior decay and boring from within. Even if we fight, or perhaps because we do, we may be faced with the necessity of resuscitating democracy from the almost lethal dose of wartime measures. Even if we win a defensive war, fascism may still reign among our enemies, and we shall be too morally and spiritually weakened to combat their success story, the triumphant march of totalitarian ideologies. In any of the possibilities I can foresee, our greatest need is the clearest understanding of what democracy means, the most patient rational articulation of its principles. And I do not mean that this should be a rare secret, possessed by the favored few who have written books on the subject. I mean it should belong to the masses whom democracy educates—certainly all those who enjoy the opportunities of college education. That, as I have tried to show, cannot happen until the colleges make their students philosophers instead of sophists.

Last June, while the commencement orators were calling for renewed faith in democracy, a student at Williams College wrote a guest editorial in the college paper which bluntly said fascism is a better object of faith than democracy. It has more to offer, positively and constructively. Democracy is decadent and dying. It does nothing but repeat old shibboleths, out of step with the times. Fascism does things, and does them in terms of contemporary realities. “The English government and the French government,” he wrote, “offer no twentieth-century set of aims and principles in which the poor soldiers in Flanders can put their faith as the German boys put their faith in Hitler.” We of the democracies are fighting for next to nothing. “It is we, rather than they, who are nihilists.”

Thus the cataclysm may overtake us like a summer cloud, without our special wonderment. War or no war, victory or defeat, we may wake up some morning to find that a good many boys feel as the writer of the Williams editorial. Whether it is a prewar or postwar generation will make no difference so long as it is a generation which has been educated in the manner of the past forty years. They will pass from a faith in democracy to a faith in fascism simply because outward circumstances will have sufficiently attenuated the one and strengthened the other. As President Hutchins

pointed out, our present intellectual position is “much closer to Hitler than we may care to admit... Such principles as we have are not different enough from those of Hitler to make us very rugged in defending ours in preference to his. And second, we are not united and clear about such principles as we have. We are losing our moral principles. But the vestiges of them remain to bother us and to interfere with a thoroughgoing commitment to amoral principles. Hence we are like confused, divided, ineffective Hitlers. The payoff is indicated: “In a contest between Hitler and people who are wondering why they shouldn’t be Hitlers, the finished product is bound to win.”

This may sound like a counsel of despair. But it is defeatism in the schoolroom, not on the battlefield. Strangely enough, it is much easier to solicit preparedness for war than preparedness for peace. Men can be energized into action, even radical reforms, when the issues are urgent enough, and the ends not much beyond their noses. The long-term objectives are seldom achieved by the purposeful planning of man or the concerted action of nations. They are reached, slowly and painfully, through the inscrutable windings of history. Education will not shake off its typical modern faults until history is ready for the end of modern times and the birth of a new cultural epoch. The impending cataclysm foreshadows the event. I know I may be looking for miracles, but I cherish the hope that if democracy dies it will be reborn in a better culture than that of the modern world. 

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