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## THE GREAT CONVERSATION

VOLUME 1 - *GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD*

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CHAPTER III

### *Education and Economics*

**A** PART from John Dewey and those few of his followers who understand him, most writers on education hold that, though education through great books and the liberal arts is still the best education for the few, it cannot be the best education for the many, because the many have not the capacity to acquire it.

It would seem that this education is the best for everybody, if it is the best for the best, provided everybody can get it. The question, then, is: Can everybody get it? This is the most important question in education. Perhaps it is the most important question in the world.

Nobody knows the answer to this question. There has never been a time in history when everybody has had a chance to get a liberal education. We can, however, examine the alternatives, and the consequences of each.

If leisure and political power are a reason for liberal education, then everybody in America now has this reason, and everybody where democracy and industrialization penetrate will ultimately have it. If leisure and political power require this education, everybody in America now requires it, and everybody where democracy and industrialization penetrate will ultimately require it. If the people are not capable of acquiring this education, they should be deprived of political power and probably of leisure. Their uneducated political power is dangerous, and their uneducated leisure is degrading and will be dangerous. If the people are incapable of achieving the education that responsible democratic citizenship demands, then democracy is doomed, Aristotle rightly condemned the mass of mankind to natural slavery, and the sooner we set about reversing the trend toward democracy the better it will be for the world.

On the other hand, the conclusion that everybody should have the chance to have that education which will fit him for responsible democratic citizenship and which will develop his human powers to the fullest degree does not require the immediate adoption in any given country of universal liberal education. This conclusion states the ideal toward which the society should strive. Any number of practical reasons may prevent the society from moving rapidly toward this ideal. But this does not mean that the statement of and devotion to the ideal are without value. On the contrary, the educational policy of a country will depend on the clarity and enthusiasm with which its educational ideal is stated and believed.

The poverty of a country may seem to prevent it from rapid approximation of its educational ideal. In the past the education of the few rested on the labor of the many. It was assumed, perhaps rightly, that the few could not have education unless the many were deprived of it. Thomas Jefferson's proposal of three years of education for all could have been, and probably was, opposed on the ground that the economy of Virginia could not survive it. Whatever may have been the case in that state 150 years ago, and whatever may be the case today in underdeveloped countries, it can no longer be claimed that liberal education for all, from childhood to the grave, is beyond the economic powers of the United States.

The economic question can arise in another way. It can be suggest-

ed that liberal education is no good to a man who is starving, that the first duty of man is to earn a living, and that learning to earn a living and then earning it will absorb the time that might be devoted to liberal education in youth and maturity.

This argument is persuasive in countries where people are actually starving and where the economic system is at so rudimentary a stage that all a man's waking hours must be dedicated to extracting a meager livelihood from the soil. Undoubtedly the first task of the statesman in such countries is to raise the standard of living to such a point that the people may be freed from economic slavery and given the time to get the education appropriate to free men. Millions of men throughout the world are living in economic slavery, they are condemned to subhuman lives. We should do everything we can to strike the shackles from them. Even while we are doing so, we must remember that economic independence is not an end in itself; it is only a means, though an absolutely necessary one, to leading a human life. Even here, the clarity of the educational ideal that the society holds before itself, and the tenacity with which that ideal is pursued, are likely to be decisive of the fate of the society.

I have no doubt that a hundred years ago we thought of far, little, far-off, feudal Japan in the same way in which we think of the underdeveloped countries today. With our assistance Japan became a full-fledged, industrialized world power in the space of forty years. We and the Japanese thought, in the 1860's, how wonderful it would be if this result could be achieved. We and they fixed our minds on the economic development of Japan and modified the educational system of that country on "American lines" to promote this economic development. So the rich got richer, the poor got poorer, the powerful got more bellicose; and Japan became a menace to the world and to itself.

No one can question the desirability of technical training in underdeveloped countries. No one can be satisfied with technical training as an ideal. The ideal is liberal education, and technical training can be justified only because it may help to supply the economic base that will make universal liberal education possible.

In developed countries technical training is also necessary, just as work is necessary in such countries. But the West has already achieved such a standard of living that it cannot use economic backwardness as an excuse for failing to face the task of making liberal education available to all. As far as the United States is concerned, the reorganization of the educational system would make it possible for the system to make its contribution to the lib-

eral education of the young by the time they reached the age of eighteen.

Think of the time that could be saved by the simple process of squeezing the waste, water, and frivolity out of American education. The American scheme of an eight-year elementary school, a four-year high school, and a four-year college, with graduate and professional work on top of that, is unique in the world, and we cannot congratulate ourselves on its uniqueness. No other country could afford the duplication that occurs in passing from one unit in the American system to another, or the inordinate length of time that is consumed by each unit. The tremendous waste of time in the American educational system must result in part from the fact that there is so much time to waste. A six-year elementary school, a three- or four-year high school, and a three- or four-year college would eliminate from two to four years of lost motion and leave plenty of time for liberal education.

The degree of leisure now enjoyed by the whole American people is such as to open liberal education to all adults if they knew where to find it. The industrial worker now has twenty hours of free time a week that his grandfather did not have. Neither in youth nor in his adult life does he need much training in order to learn how to make a living. The constant drive to simplify industrial operations will eventually mean and means in many industries today that only a few hours will be required to give the worker all the training he can use.

If we assume that the object of concentration on vocational training in the schools is what John Dewey's mistaken followers think it is, to help young people to achieve economic independence, then we must admit that under present conditions in the United States the effort is disproportionate to the results. And the effort to do something that is not worth doing drives out of education the kind of activity that should characterize it. This effort diverts our attention from the enormously difficult task of discovering what education should be and then introducing it into the schools.

Even before mechanization had gone as far as it has now, one factor prevented vocational training, or any other form of ad hoc instruction, from accomplishing what was expected of it, and that factor was the mobility of the American population. This was a mobility of every kind in space, in occupation, and in economic position. Training given in one place for work in that place was thrown away because the persons trained were almost certain to live and work in another place, or in several other places. Training

given in one kind of work was equally useless because the persons trained usually did several other kinds of work rather than the kind they were trained to do. The failure of ad hoc instruction is so obvious that it has contributed to the notion that education, or schooling, is really irrelevant to any important activities of life and is merely a period through which the young must pass because we do not know what else to do with them. Actually the failure of ad hoc instruction shows nothing but the failure of ad hoc instruction. It does not show that education is unimportant or that in a mobile, industrial society there is no education that can meet the needs of the people.

If we are to take the assembly line as the characteristic feature of Western industry, we must regard industrialization as at best a mixed blessing. The monotony, impersonality, and uncreativity of such work supply strong justification for the movement toward a steady reduction in the hours of labor. But what if the time that is gained for life off the assembly line is wasted, as much of it is today, in pursuits that can only be described as subhuman? What if the man as he works on the line has nothing in his head?

As the business of earning a living has become easier and simpler, it has also become less interesting and significant; and all personal problems have become more perplexing. This fact, plus the fact of the disappearance of any education adequate to deal with it, has led to the development of all kinds of cults, through which the baffled worker seeks some meaning for his life, and to the extension on an unprecedented scale of the most trivial recreations, through which he may hope to forget that his human problems are unsolved.

Adam Smith stated the case long ago: "A man without the proper use of the intellectual faculties of a man, is, if possible, more contemptible than even a coward, and seems to be mutilated and deformed in a still more essential part of the character of human nature." He points out that this is the condition of "the great body of the people," who, by the division of labor are confined in their employment "to a few very simple operations" in which the worker "has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur." The result, according to Smith, is that "the torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life."

Yet the substitution of machines for slaves gives us an opportunity to build a civilization as glorious as that of the Greeks, and far more lasting because far more just. I do not concede that torpor of mind is the natural and normal condition of the mass of mankind, or that these people are necessarily incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, or of conceiving generous, noble, and tender sentiments, or of forming just judgments concerning the affairs of private and public life. If they are so, and if they are so as a result of the division of labor, then industrialization and democracy are fundamentally opposed; for people in this condition are not qualified to govern themselves. I do not believe that industrialization and democracy are inherently opposed. But they are in actual practice opposed unless the gap between them is bridged by liberal education for all. That mechanization which tends to reduce a man to a robot also supplies the economic base and the leisure that will enable him to get a liberal education and to become truly a man.

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#### CHAPTER IV

### *The Disappearance of Liberal Education*

THE countries of the West are committed to universal, free, compulsory education. The United States first made this commitment and has extended it further than any other. In this country 91.5% of the children who are fourteen years old and 71.3% of those between fourteen and seventeen are in school. It will not be suggested that they are receiving the education that the democratic ideal requires. The West has not accepted the proposition that the democratic ideal demands liberal education for all. In the United States, at least, the prevailing opinion seems to be that the demands of that ideal are met by universal schooling, rather than by universal liberal education. What goes on in school is regarded as of relatively minor importance. The object appears to be to keep the child off the labor market and to detain him in comparatively sanitary surroundings until we are ready to have him go to work.

The results of universal, free, compulsory education in America can be acceptable only on the theory that the object of the schools is something other than education, that it is, for example, to keep

the young from cluttering up homes and factories during a difficult period of their lives, or that it is to bring them together for social or recreational purposes.

These last purposes, those which are social and recreational, the American educational system, on a very low level, achieves. It throws young people together. Since this does not take any greater effort than is required to pass compulsory school laws and build buildings, the accomplishment of this purpose would not at first blush seem to be a matter for boasting. Yet we often hear of it as something we should be proud of, and even as something that should suggest to us the main line of a sound educational policy. We often hear that bringing young people together, having them work and play together, and having them organize themselves "democratically" are the great contributions to democracy that the educational system can make. This is an expansion of the doctrine that was popular in my youth about the moral benefits conferred on everybody through intercollegiate athletics, which was, in turn, an adaptation of the remark dubiously imputed to the Duke of Wellington about the relationship between the battle of Waterloo and the playing fields of Eton.

No one can deny the value of getting together, of learning to get along with others, of coming to appreciate the methods of organization and the duties of membership in an organization any more than one can deny the importance of physical health and sportsmanship. It seems on the face of it a trifle absurd, however, to go to the trouble of training and engaging teachers, of erecting laboratories and libraries, and of laying out a program of instruction and learning if, in effect, the curriculum is extra and the extra-curriculum is the heart of the matter.

It seems doubtful whether the purposes of the educational system can be found in the pursuit of objects that the Boy Scouts, the Y.M.C.A., and the local country club, to say nothing of the family and the church, purport to be pursuing. The unique function of the educational system would appear to have something to do with the mind. No other agency in the community sets itself up, or is set up, to train the mind. To the extent to which the educational system is diverted to other objects, to that extent the mind of the community is neglected.

This is not to say that the educational system should not contribute to the physical, social, and moral development of those committed to its charge. But the method of its contribution, apart from the facilities for extra-curriculum activities that it provides, is through

the mind. The educational system seeks to establish the rational foundations for good physical, moral, and social behavior. These rational foundations are the result of liberal education.

Education is supposed to have something to do with intelligence. It was because of this connection that it was always assumed that if the people were to have political power they would have to have education. They would have to have it if they were to use their power intelligently. This was the basis of the Western commitment to universal, free, compulsory education. I have suggested that the kind of education that will develop the requisite intelligence for democratic citizenship is liberal education, education through great books and the liberal arts, a kind of education that has all but disappeared from the schools, colleges, and universities of the United States.

Why did this education disappear? It was the education of the Founding Fathers. It held sway until fifty years ago. Now it is almost gone. I attribute this phenomenon to two factors, internal decay and external confusion.

By the end of the first quarter of this century great books and the liberal arts had been destroyed by their teachers. The books had become the private domain of scholars. The word "classics" came to be limited to those works which were written in Greek and Latin. Whitehead refers to Wordsworth's remark about men of science who "murder to dissect" and properly observes: "In the past, classical scholars have been veritable assassins compared to them." The classical books, it was thought, could be studied only in the original languages, and a student might attend courses in Plato and Lucretius for years without discovering that they had any ideas. His professors were unlikely to be interested in ideas. They were interested in philological details. The liberal arts in their hands degenerated into meaningless drill.

Their reply to criticism and revolt was to demand, forgetting that interest is essential in education, that their courses be required. By the end of the first quarter of this century the great Greek and Latin writers were studied only to meet requirements for entrance to or graduation from college. Behind these tariff walls the professors who had many of the great writers and much of the liberal arts in their charge contentedly sat, oblivious of the fact that they were depriving the rising generation of an important part of their cultural heritage and the training needed to understand it, and oblivious also of the fact that they were depriving themselves of the reason for their existence.



Philosophy, history, and literature, and the disciplines that broke away from philosophy political science, sociology, and psychology suffered from another kind of decay, which resulted from a confusion that I shall refer to later, a confusion about the nature and scope of the scientific method. This confusion widened the break between those disciplines that split off from philosophy; it led professors of these disciplines up many blind alleys; and it produced profound changes in philosophical study. The same influences cut the heart out of the study of history and literature.

In general the professors of the humanities and the social sciences and history, fascinated by the marvels of experimental natural science, were overpowered by the idea that similar marvels could be produced in their own fields by the use of the same methods. They also seemed convinced that any results obtained in these fields by any other methods were not worth achieving. This automatically ruled out writers previously thought great who had had the misfortune to live before the method of empirical natural science had reached its present predominance and who had never thought of applying it to problems and subject matters outside the range of empirical natural science. The insights of these writers were at once out of date; for they could, in the nature of the case, represent little but prejudice or guesswork, which it would be the object of the scientific method to sweep out of the way of progress.

Since the aim of philosophers, historians, and critics of literature and art, to say nothing of social scientists, was to be as "scientific as possible, they could not concern themselves much with ideas or with the "unscientific" tradition of the West. Nor could they admit the utility of the liberal arts, apart from those associated with mathematics.

Meanwhile the idea of education for all became firmly established in the United States. The school-leaving age steadily rose. An unprecedented flood of pupils and students overwhelmed the schools, colleges, and universities, a flood that has gone on growing, with minor fluctuations, to this day. Merely to house and staff the educational enterprise was an undertaking that would have put a strain on the wealth and intelligence of any country.

The triumphs of industrialization, which made this educational expansion possible, resulted from triumphs of technology, which rested on triumphs of science, which were promoted by specialization. Specialization, experimental science, technology, and industrialization were new. Great books and the liberal arts were

identified in the public mind with dead languages, arid routines, and an archaic, prescientific past. The march of progress could be speeded by getting rid of them, the public thought, and using scientific method and specialization for the double purpose of promoting technological advance and curing the social maladjustments that industrialization brought with it. This program would have the incidental value of restoring interest to its place in education and of preparing the young to take part in the new, specialized, scientific, technological, industrial, democratic society that was emerging, to join in raising the standard of living and in solving the dreadful problems that the effort to raise it was creating.

The revolt against the classical dissectors and drillmasters was justified. So was the new interest in experimental science. The revolt against liberal education was not justified. Neither was the belief that the method of experimental science could replace the methods of history, philosophy, and the arts. As is common in educational discussion, the public had confused names and things. The dissectors and drillmasters had no more to do with liberal education than the ordinary college of liberal arts has to do with those arts today. And the fact that a method obtains sensational results in one field is no guarantee that it will obtain any results whatever in another.

Do science, technology, industrialization, and specialization render the Great Conversation irrelevant?

We have seen that industrialization makes liberal education more necessary than ever, and that the leisure it provides makes liberal education possible, for the first time, for everybody.


We have observed that the reorganization of the educational system would enable everybody to get a liberal education and to become a specialist as well.

I should like to add that specialization, instead of making the Great Conversation irrelevant, makes it more pertinent than ever. Specialization makes it harder to carry on any kind of conversation; but this calls for greater effort, not the abandonment of the attempt.

There can be little argument about the proposition that the task of the future is the creation of a community. Community seems to depend on communication. This requirement is not met by improvements in transportation or in mail, telegraph, telephone, or radio services. These technological advances are frightening, rather than reassuring, and disruptive, rather than unifying, in such a world as we have today. They are the means of bringing an ene-

my's bombs or propaganda into our homes.

The effectiveness of modern methods of communication in promoting a community depends on whether there is something intelligible and human to communicate. This, in turn, depends on a common language, a common stock of ideas, and common human standards. These the Great Conversation affords. Reading these books should make a man feel himself a member of the species and tradition that these books come from. He should recognize the ties that bind him to his fellow members of the species and tradition. He should be able to communicate, in a real sense, with other men.

Must the specialist be excluded from the community? If so, there can hardly be one; for increasingly in the West everybody is a specialist. The task is to have a community nevertheless, and to discover means of using specialties to promote it. This can be done through the Great Conversation. Through it the expert can discover the great common principles that underlie the specialties. Through it he can bring ideas to bear upon his experience. In the light of the Great Conversation his special brand of knowledge loses its particularistic vices and becomes a means of penetrating the great books. The mathematical specialist, for example, can get further faster into the great mathematicians than a reader who is without his specialized training. With the help of great books, specialized knowledge can radiate out into a genuine interfiltration of common learning and common life. Imagine the younger generation studying great books and learning the liberal arts. Imagine an adult population continuing to turn to the same sources of strength, inspiration, and communication. We could talk to one another then. We should be even better specialists than we are today because we could understand the history of our specialty and its relation to all the others. We would be better citizens and better men. We might turn out to be the nucleus of the world community. 

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## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Is published weekly for its members by the

### CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.