

Education OR Conditioning?

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AN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM is the product of the environment in which it developed: it does not function in a vacuum. This is self-evident. What is not so evident is the degree to which education subjectively serves the direct purpose of its environment, or objectively provides a critical and progressive role within it. The question, therefore, is: should education lead, or follow, those whom it serves?

When education is financially dependent upon the state, as in Britain, the degree of compromise is overwhelming. In these circumstances, vigilance is vital. We should never stop asking: how is society consequently affected?

In the last three hundred years we have witnessed the growth of an ugly idea: that the state has an existence more important than the individuals of which it is composed. Having defined, breathed life into, and released the state, we now find that one of the key weapons it has for maintaining its existence is systematic education.

Where a state serves sectional interests it follows that the teaching of reality in school and university could be dangerous—inconvenient at the very least. Far better to substitute for it the cool, clinical theories beloved by conceptual analysts. And this is the critical point at which the world's young generation of students is challenging parents, politicians and police—

the people who compose, lead and maintain the System.

The young, as never before, are *instinctively* aware of something radically wrong. The traumatic upheavals we witness daily are symptoms of their efforts to arrive at a more realistic appraisal of the nature of society. They nurture the feeling that twentieth century civilisation has lost the distinction between good and bad, right and wrong, despite the pious pronouncements of good intentions; that values, unlike man's probing into the heavens, are going in any direction but upwards. They want, as a necessary process of advancement, to disentangle confusions between scientific truth and man-made distortions of what is natural, and between justice and political expediency.

The response of society is everywhere to be seen. In the mass media, in Parliament, and in public places, one hears virtually nothing but condemnation of students and demands for retribution. Why give them grants if they behave like anarchists? Watch a television current affairs programme: the reporter asks "members of the public" whether students should have a say in running their universities. But when have we heard him ask the students: "Why are you rejecting your parents' society? What's wrong with it? What's your alternative?"

Only through education can a society experience evolution, a transformation into something better. But to try and adapt the educational system in such a way that it should directly influence, and subsequently alter, society, would be to create a tense situation of antagonism and conflict, which would be strongly resisted by those who have a vested interest in the existing way of life.

Inevitably, economics is a central issue. Through it, we see the critical relationship between industry and state machinery. Industry grants huge sums of money to colleges and institutions, and the ensuing research has usually to be directly relevant to its goals. Government, anxious at election

time to point to a "healthy" economy, streamlines curricula so that students become specialists in fields directly suited to the economy. The student of this social science, so fundamental to man's well-being, is left astonished by the complexity and confusions inherent in what he is supposed to absorb and accept.

Principles safely forgotten, he hears that a policy aimed at taxing land values is fine for "emerging" or under-developed nations, but not for advanced societies like our own. At the same time he is told that equity requires that advanced industrial nations adopt free trade policies towards developing nations but that these latter should be allowed to adopt protectionist measures.

He hears that wages are constantly depreciating in value; that labour is to blame for not working harder, or more efficiently. He gets the merest inkling (a three-line footnote in Richard G. Lipsey's 874-page text-book *Positive Economics*) about one of the key weapons in current economic practice — the legal counterfeiting of money by governments which is the source of ruinous inflation.

He learns of measures which allegedly bring stability to the system, like paying huge government subsidies to reduce retail prices or to compensate for non-production, and wonders at the foundations of a structure built in such a way that it would tumble down with one single decision to end the drain on the public purse.

He hears of the historical malpractices of the industrial revolution, and is asked to believe that society is discharging its obligations by spending more on welfare, the sophisticated form of Poor Laws. But, as Arthur Seldon warns us in the foreword to Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man*: "The welfare state is, or in a free society should be, a passing phase, but there is a danger that it will be erected into a permanent appendage, that the growth will be beaten into a shackle." Today, thanks to welfare economics, journalists demand, and politicians promise, increased

expenditure on welfare services.

The grotesque infirmities of society, even when viewed in the abstract, are as sickening a sight as the surviving victims of Hiroshima. These are the things that the students wish to discuss with their teachers, and they want to question the basic assumptions beneath the suggested cures and advocated remedies, and to put them right.

One can see that, if the students left their establishments of advanced learning with a new ethos not compatible with current values,

they would exert a tremendous influence on our leaders.

The politicians and commentators who mould public attitudes and values would be obliged to defend their positions, to discard the hypocrisy and double-talk. But for the present they are spared the intellectual effort, for the educational system is resisting the radical questioning of students, and education must continue to serve the function of a hot house for battery hens, valued purely for the efficiency with which it trains people for their place in the system.