

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 educa-

tion, 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 suggested 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 dear, 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 liberal 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.