

131

· R E V I E W S ·

Education and the Modern Man\*

By FRANCIS NEILSON

THE STEADY STREAM of books on education does not abate, although for a generation it has been shown that the efforts of the moderns have brought schooling into disrepute. It is almost impossible to keep up with the output of the presses on this subject, and it is difficult in estimating the worth of these publications to learn from them what should be done to reform the system. Most of the authors do not realize that they are in great measure to blame for the present state of affairs. Until they become conscious of the errors, their experiments may go from bad to worse.

Perhaps a right move will not be made in this matter until our instructors realize that education in the true sense of the term is not for the masses. The common school gives the opportunity to every boy and girl to test their capacity for learning the elements of education. However, those who survive the test are so few that it is doubtful whether a tenth of our colleges and universities are necessary. At least seventy-five per cent of the pupils, owing to economic pressure, shift at an early stage from the campus to the workshop or the farm. It is only the few who have the capacity and inclination to continue their studies beyond the high school period. And education, as it is understood in the intellectual sense, is very different from the schooling that is considered sufficient for the boy or girl who has to earn a living. Perhaps some progress would be made in this difficult matter if our mentors would draw a severe line of demarcation between instruction for the masses who must work for their living and those who desire to master the exact sciences and the arts.

If the writing of treatises upon education bore good and effective fruit, we should all be as wise as Socrates and as rich as Midas. Alas, the state of the world reveals the sad neglect of the counsel of sages. The latest report of the Federal Bureau of Investigation upon the delinquency of youth reminds us sharply that there is something radically wrong not only in the home but in the schools and colleges of the country. The admonitions administered regularly by J. Edgar Hoover to parents and society

\* *Education for Modern Man*. By Sidney Hook. New York: The Dial Press, 1946, xiv + 237 pp., \$2.75.

in general seem to fall upon dull ears, for he has to admit that the figures show an alarming increase in the crimes perpetrated by youth (male and female).

This woeful state of affairs acts as no deterrent upon those who imagine they know how to solve (through educational processes), the problems that afflict us. Most of the authors of books on education seem to carry on their work more or less cheerfully by utterly disregarding crime statistics and the figures of illiteracy gathered during the draft. Does this mean that we are to persist with the system that yields such baneful results? Surely the most enthusiastic writer on education must understand that since the common school system was inaugurated, wars have not only spread into all areas of the world but have dumbfounded the ordinary citizen by their horrible ferocity and destruction.

Perhaps the truth of the matter, as this critic sees it, is that the present system of schools is rotten at the core. Certainly for a generation at least the instructors have had it all their own way, and they have succeeded in changing the old common school curriculum out of all recognition. Indeed, it may be said that the vast majority of teachers today are the victims of their predecessors' experiments.

What, then, can the taxpayer expect for his money? When illiteracy is rife, as it is now, who shall bear the blame but those who have formed themselves into a trade union to preserve their incompetency? There is an illiteracy of the educated today that is far more dangerous than the illiteracy of the illiterate. It is alleged that the teachers are organized under a totalitarian system which is as ironclad as anything we have heard of in Russia. Whether or not this be true, the records indicate clearly that they are not qualified (no matter how well organized they are) for the work they have undertaken at the taxpayers' expense.

One source of difficulty in this matter is that our mentors have lost touch with the home and with the adult pursuits of those they have instructed. Some years ago I gave thirty lectures on the literature of the world to a summer class of teachers who were working for a degree in education. The group comprised between thirty and forty women. Before and after each lecture, I discussed the problems that were causing some anxiety, and thus had the opportunity to learn from them how well equipped they were for the task in view. In not a single case could I find one person I would hire to teach a child of ten. The extraordinary thing about that experience was that every one who came to the class was conscious of great gaps in her schooling.

For one who remembers quite clearly the system as it was forty or fifty years ago, and who had the benefit of night schools of the time, it is an easy matter to contrast the superiority of the teaching methods then and now. When I was a boy, teachers were well-informed persons, and not one I remember was so vain as to imagine that at any time he could afford to stop learning.

Of course I am familiar with the plea put forth that everything is changed. It is another world now, and what was of service to our fathers and their sires is utterly unsuitable to the man who has to be taught how to make a living. This is the stupidest excuse for dilatoriness and incompetency that the teacher can make. Men are still men, and so long as they have to work for food, fuel, clothing, and shelter, they will be the same as they were in the days of Plato. Nothing, indeed is changed in the economic sense. It is only in the sphere of spiritual things that there has been a falling off.

It is recorded in the "Timaeus" that when Solon talked to the priests of Egypt, he learned they were informed about antiquity:

. . . Whatever happened either in your country or in ours, or in any other region of which we are informed—if any action which is noble or great or in any other way remarkable has taken place, all that has been written down of old, and is preserved in our temples; whereas you and other nations are just being provided with letters and the other things which States require; and then, at the usual period, the stream from heaven descends like a pestilence, and leaves only those of you who are destitute of letters and education; and thus you have to begin all over again as children, and know nothing of what happened in ancient times, either among us or among yourselves.<sup>1</sup>

These wars we suffer as a pestilence from heaven should remind us vividly that we "are but children" and have not learned from the past. We have ignored the essential history of peoples and nations, and how they suffered for their misdemeanors and lack of education. The aged Critias has much to tell us that we have forgotten or ignored. My early youth was spent at a time when children considered it a great honor to hear their elders discuss the questions of the day. And I think that most men of my age will admit that from the lips of their elders they learned things never effaced from their memory. In the "Timaeus" I am reminded of the value of listening to the experiences of the old folk:

. . . Truly, as is often said, the lessons which we have learned as children make a wonderful impression on our memories, for I am not sure that

<sup>1</sup> "The Works of Plato," trans. by B. Jowett, New York, Tudor Publishing Co., no date, Vol. IV, Pt. II, pp. 367-8.

I could remember all that I heard yesterday, but I should be much surprised if I forgot any of these things which I have heard very long ago. I listened to the old man telling them, when a child, with great interest at the time; he was very ready to teach me, and I asked him about them a great many times, so that they were branded into my mind in ineffaceable letters. As soon as the day broke I began to repeat them to my companions, that they as well as myself might have a material of discourse.<sup>2</sup>

But what can the young learn from the average old man of our day? Poor fellow! The victim of Hollywood, the slave of the radio and the pulp magazine! What has he to impart to the youth whose minds are molded in the very trough which gave shape to his own? It has been said by an investigator that there are two features of the newspaper to which the vast majority of the citizens of the country turn their attention morning and evening: the pages reserved for comic strips and the sport section. For many years I have tested business men as to the matter they read in the newspaper, and save in very few cases they digest no more than is given in the headlines.

The turmoil and speed are too much for their tired minds. The events of today obliterate their memory of what occurred yesterday. And, yet, we learn from those who gather statistics that the sale of books during the war has exceeded all the expectations of publishers. Whether the books have been read with understanding or not is quite another matter. It has not been my good fortune to meet those business men who in general conversation reveal a knowledge of what has happened, which will bear them in good stead when they have to face the problems of the future.

Recently I was attracted by a book entitled "Education for Modern Man," by Sidney Hook. After reading it, I asked ten or a dozen of my friends who were interested in the subject if they had seen it. Two or three admitted that they had read reviews which praised it highly. But I have not yet found anyone with whom I can discuss the contents of the work. It appears to me that it is not really a treatise on education so much as it is merely a rebuttal in a quarrel between two schools of thought. And, yet, in the list of educational ends which Dr. Hook presents to us, six out of the seven are canons that have always been accepted. I cannot understand who would quarrel with the purpose they have in view. The sixth aim, however, is somewhat new:

At some level; it [education] should equip young men and women with the general skills and techniques and the specialized knowledge

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 371-2.

which, together with the virtues and aptitudes already mentioned, will make it possible for them to do some productive work related to their capacities and interests.<sup>3</sup>

This must be included in the list to supply the deficiencies caused by the abolition of the system of apprenticeship to trades. Moreover, it covers the aim of educating a boy or girl in the business of how to make a living.

In Chapter I, entitled "The Ends of Education," the author considers it important that education for growth should go hand in hand with education for democracy. Democracy is an elusive term; indeed, quite as much so as the term "values." For the stage has been reached when almost any political system can be called democratic for vote-getting purposes. However, we must not consider this aim too seriously because underlying it there seems to be a notion that education is gravely retarded in some strange way by social distinctions. In England there was an election a year ago, and one of the burning questions of the platform was whether or not it was well to abolish the old school tie. Now we find that England is still a "democracy" although it has a Socialist government and most of the permanent officials are men who went to public schools and still wear the same old ties.

One would be hard put to it to find a really democratic State. Such a thing never existed; and, indeed, so long as men are men will never exist. A State without class distinction is a political impossibility, for the greatest snobs have always been those who have made their own way in life. As self-made men rise in affluence, their desire for social exclusiveness increases. If the men were to rid themselves of this aspiration, their wives and daughters would rebel and urge them to take every social advantage that the increase of wealth could obtain for them.

Here in our country we suffer from just the same defects as are apparent in the English and the French people. That the system of government has little or nothing to do with this matter can easily be demonstrated by looking with unprejudiced eyes at the reports of the growth of education in Germany and in Japan during the early part of this century.

It is difficult to follow Dr. Hook along the line he lays down of a democratic approach to the problem of the education of the future, for he is deeply disturbed about the persistence of religious faiths and metaphysical beliefs, which in some peculiar way affect the growth of knowledge. Yet he says:

The existence of democratic communities in which individuals of conflicting religious faiths and metaphysical beliefs sincerely co-operate in its

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

support indicates that it is possible to find criteria for accepting democracy that do not depend on revelation or intuition. Indeed, to claim that democracy is uniquely entailed by only one set of theological or metaphysical intuitions, and that no one can sincerely or consistently be a democrat who does not embrace them, is not only logically false—it imperils the very existence of a democratic community.<sup>4</sup>

I may be dull witted, but I fail to see what democracy has to do with "religious faiths and metaphysical beliefs." In this country we have adherents of nearly all the faiths that are known today. Surely Dr. Hook does not want us to infer that the conflict of opinions in these cults has in any way retarded the progress of education. And as for metaphysical beliefs affecting the work of instructors, I must confess that I have been under the impression for a great many years that metaphysicians are as rare, even in the academies, as virtue itself. I do not remember when, in a college or a university, I had five minutes conversation with a metaphysician who did not apologize for his disinclination to be drawn on the question. Somehow this nebulous thing—democracy—so often referred to in the journals, survives in spite of all "religious faiths and metaphysical beliefs."

An English psychologist, who spent years at an American university, told me that there were as many kinds of democracy practiced in our States as there were varieties of pickles, and perhaps the only person who could speak with authority on the subject was the ward heeler. This shrewd observer did not confuse even our political democracy at its best with "mobocracy."

Some of our critics do not hesitate to say that they have found here more racial and social hatred, more political graft and corruption, even in time of peace, than have been reported from all the European States. To what extent is the education of this country responsible for this terrible state of affairs? Dr. Hook understands with most of us that education has for its aim the making of a decent citizen. Where are the decent citizens strong enough in force to shape our political institutions idealwards—toward the Jeffersonian goal?

Religious faiths and metaphysical beliefs worked havoc with prelates and statesmen for many centuries, but I thought that society in the main had rid itself of these troubles not long after the French Revolution when the up-to-date rationalists appeared in force. Why the remnants that are left of religious faiths and metaphysical beliefs should be stumbling blocks to the disadvantage of democratic education I cannot understand. For although all men are metaphysicians, whether they know it or not, I seldom hear anyone discuss the question of his beliefs.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

It is in Chapter II that we learn what seems to be the chief reason for Dr. Hook's treatise. He selects Chancellor Robert M. Hutchins, Monsignor Fulton Sheen, and Dr. Mortimer J. Adler as the chief exponents of the theory that "the appropriate end of education can be *deduced* from the true nature of man."<sup>5</sup> Certainly, gadgets do not change the nature of man. They may alter his habit, but his nature remains untouched, for no matter what invention is thrust upon him to make life harder, he is still a land animal and his nature is governed by that economic fact. The conditions in every part of the world show unmistakably that the nature of man is no different than it was in the days of Bonaparte, of Caesar, or of Alexander.

When I went to school, I never heard anything about the hair-splitting controversies that rage today. The instructors at the Liverpool Institute were there to teach the pupils, and they enlightened them to the best of their knowledge. The curriculum was based upon what are called the liberal arts, but nobody ever mentioned them. The school turned out not only good scholars but first-class bankers, merchants, and teachers. What the modern man will think of Dr. Hook's controversies in Chapter II (if he takes the trouble to read them), I do not know. But of this I feel sure: there is not a business man of my acquaintance who is interested in them. I cannot imagine a modern industrialist becoming deeply engrossed in the following:

. . . A rational conception is one warranted by evidence and a conception of the world may be rational *if* the evidence points to the fact that men are irrational and the world chaotic. I am not saying they are but contesting the relevance of an a priori metaphysical deduction to these questions. Nor am I denying that the study of philosophy has an important place in the liberal arts curriculum. It has many justifications—among them the achievement of a methodological sophistication that may immunize students against the confusion of definitions or linguistic resolutions with empirical hypotheses of varying degrees of generality, which constitutes so much of traditional and popular metaphysics.<sup>6</sup>

The teacher who would present education in such a form for modern man would gain few pupils. And yet, Dr. Hook reminds us: "The teacher is the kingpin of the educational system. He makes and breaks programs."<sup>7</sup> However, if he is a capable servant of the art, he runs no risk by using simple language that can be readily understood. If he should indulge in such terms as those quoted above, he would break any system of

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22-3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

education that has ever been devised. I would advise Dr. Hook, if he does not think it an impertinence on my part, to read Pringle-Pattison's article in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* on "Scholasticism,"<sup>8</sup> or Norman Kemp Smith's "A Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason,"<sup>9</sup> as specimens of how to present profound subjects in a simple, readable way.

Paragraph after paragraph in this work is beyond the understanding of the man who has been educated in the present system. Furthermore, Dr. Hook's ideas about what he calls science are years behind the times. He says: "Whatever views a man professes today about God, human freedom, Cosmic Purpose and personal survival, he cannot reasonably hold them in ignorance of the scientific account of the world and man."<sup>10</sup> He can and does. And it is a pity that Dr. Hook indicates in so many places that he is not aware of the revolution that has been taking place in the thought of scientists. I pointed this out in an article some months ago.<sup>11</sup>

This book, "Education for Modern Man," seems to me to be written for professors, not for laymen. In looking through it again for the markings that I made when I first read it, I have become more convinced than ever that no improvement can be made in education by those who follow the ideas of Dr. Hook. Not once in the work does he give the slightest indication that he has been in touch with the child or the youth after he has gone into the world to make a living. His recommendations as to what education should be for modern man are conclusive on one point: he is in need of a sabbatical year in which to meet the bankers, the merchants, the manufacturers, and the trade unionists of the country, just to learn what they are thinking and what they do not know. He says:

What, concretely, should the modern man know in order to live intelligently in the world today? What should we require that he learn of subject matters and skills in his educational career in order that he may acquire maturity in feeling, in judgment, in action? Can we indicate the minimum indispensables of a liberal education in the modern world? This approach recognizes that no subject per se is inherently liberal at all times and places. But it also recognizes that within a given age in a given culture, the enlightenment and maturity, the freedom and power, which liberal education aims to impart, is more likely to be achieved by mastery of some subject matters and skills than by others. In short, principles must bear fruit in specific programs in specific times. In what follows I shall speak of studies rather than of conventional courses.

<sup>8</sup> Eleventh edition, 1911, Vol. XXIV, pp. 346-56.

<sup>9</sup> London, Macmillan and Co., 1923.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>11</sup> "Science and the Liberal Arts in Education," *AM. JOUR. ECON. SOCIO.*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (January, 1945), pp. 155-74.



(1) The liberally educated person should be intellectually at home in the world of physical nature. He should know something about the earth he inhabits and its place in the solar system, about the solar system and its relation to the cosmos. He should know something about mechanics, heat, light, electricity and magnetism as the universal forces that condition anything he is or may become. He should be just as intimately acquainted with the nature of man as a biological species, his evolution, and the discoveries of experimental genetics. He should know something about the structure of his own body and mind, and the cycle of birth, growth, learning and decline. To have even a glimmer of understanding of these things, he must go beyond the level of primary description and acquire some grasp of the principles that explain what he observes. Where an intelligent grasp of principles requires a knowledge of mathematics, its fundamental ideas should be presented in such a way that students carry away not only the sense of mathematics as a tool for the solution of problems but as a study of types of order, system and language.

Such knowledge is important to the individual *not* merely because of its intrinsic fascination. Every subject from numismatics to Sanskrit possesses an intrinsic interest to those who are curious about it. . . .<sup>12</sup>

And this is for the modern man—in a democracy, I presume! Such a precise encyclopaedia of knowledge appalls me, and I am prompted to ask Dr. Hook if he has ever met at a university any professor who has mastered the course he recommends.

*New York*