

Education in a World at War

IN an address on "Education in a World at War", Charles M. McConn, Dean of the College of Arts and Science of New York University, told 500 school teachers that the world was entering an era of constant crises that would last from twenty to fifty years.

Recalling that H. G. Wells had written during the first World War that "never again in our time shall we know peace and security", the Dean declared that the quotation "holds with redoubled force for us now, and for our children, for whom, as educators, we are more concerned than for ourselves."

He added that it was the duty of educators to supply the boys and girls and young men and women under their tutelage with whatever they need for survival in a disrupted world, and that their chief need would be the ability to adjust to crisis and adapt to change.

What Dean McConn says in effect is that the purpose of education is to equip a man to cope with his environment, and, so far as is humanly possible, to shape it to his liking. That, of course, has always been the purpose of education. In view of the tragic mess in which mankind the world over has succeeded in involving itself, it would appear that in this aim education has been a ghastly failure.

Causes usually assigned for wars and rumors of war include ancient hatreds, national jealousies, commercial rivalries, race prejudices, imperialistic ambitions, competition for trade. Actually these are but superficial effects — symptoms, not causes. It is said that wars will never cease until human nature undergoes a change; until certain qualities — greed, selfishness, lust for power — have been ruled out of the hearts of men.

That, too, is false, and a good thing for us it is. If we had to change human nature before achieving a better world, we might well despair. There is nothing to show that human nature has changed in the past thousand years or that it will be any different a thousand years hence.

The deplorable condition that the world finds itself in today is not due to any of these things.

It is due to one thing and one thing alone, economic ignorance — ignorance of the fundamentals of political economy. And the responsibility for economic ignorance lies squarely at the door of education.

The nations of the world are governed largely by supposedly educated men. And yet rules and lawmakers the world over are in the main believers in the Malthusian doctrine, the ancient fallacy that population tends to increase faster than subsistence. Most of them subscribe to the belief that some nations are overcrowded and must have an outlet for their excess population. Many of them consider the machine as an evil because, as they think, it makes for unemployment.

They are highly suspicious of international trade and believe that imports should be discouraged by tariff barriers. Few of them question that wages come out of capital. They recognize unemployment for the scourge that it is, but it never dawns on them that unemployment results from man-made laws that recognize private property in land. They believe in power politics and that nations must organize into groups to maintain the balance of power.

Encumbered by such a maze of misconceptions, public education, as generally administered, naturally has been unable to supply youth with vital self-direction.

Dean McConn states that so far as he knows no school or college "has yet grasped this point or undertaken to deal with it." And he adds that "adjustment to crisis and adaptation to change are not in the curriculum, nor part of the scholastic tradition."

The Dean is almost right — almost, but not quite. There was one educator, a man of but little formal schooling himself but truly one of the world's great educators, who knew and understood.

That one was Henry George. He gave to his students of all time the sure knowledge of how to adjust to crisis, adapt to change, and work for a better world.

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