

## DECADENCE AND RECOVERY IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

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*Dr. Kirk, renowned author and nationally syndicated columnist, delivered this address before Hillsdale College students and faculty during the fourth seminar of the Center for Constructive Alternatives, Education in America: Democratic Triumph or Egalitarian Disaster?*

A few years ago, a Scottish girl visiting these United States remarked to me that American attitudes toward educational discontents are very like American attitudes toward the problem of being overweight: everyone talks about such things, but no one does anything about them. For a quarter of a century, books about the failure of American education have been pouring from the presses; yet one encounters few signs that all this protest has compelled substantial improvement.

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As Plato wrote, education is meant to develop wisdom and virtue. But American educational establishments, in general, appear to have forgotten about those ends: instead, they offer chiefly the pursuit of sociability and of material success. In the definition of C.E.M. Joad, "decadence" is the loss of an object: Joad meant that we fall into decadence when we forget or ignore aim or purpose in existence. By this definition, American education—from kindergarten through graduate school—is decadent. The search for wisdom and virtue has been abandoned.

Formal schooling is not the only aspect of modern culture that exhibits symptoms of decadence; and we are not to expect that schools and colleges and universities, by an effort wholly their own, can renew modern civilization. As my colleague Dr. Ernest van den Haag has written, faith in Education is the Pelagian heresy of modern America. Old Pelagius, in the fourth century of the Christian era, declared that

the souls of all men would be saved eventually, through the natural goodness of humankind, without need for divine grace. In our time, the typical American believes that the souls of all men will be saved through Education—without need for thought.

But it is not so, and the evidences of this theory's failure lie all about us. We cannot redeem the human condition through free and compulsory schooling alone. Nevertheless, one must begin a work of regeneration somewhere, and schooling remains one of the more important means for a renewed apprehension of wisdom and virtue. Is it possible for us to recover from fad and foible, from boredom and violence?

the more important means for a renewed apprehension of wisdom and virtue. Is it possible for us to recover from fad and foible, from boredom and violence?

To answer that question, first we must diagnose our afflictions in the realm of education. We have been suffering, I believe, from two diseases: one a sickness of understanding among the general public, the other a malady among many of our educators.

First, the American public, taken as a whole, has forgotten—or else never knew—that the ends of education are wisdom and virtue. The typical parent looks upon education as a means to material ends: the way the practical success, social advancement of a private character, and general jolliness. Although these may be desirable goals, they are not the true ends of genuine education. They may be achieved through *training* (as distinguished from *education*),

im·pri·mis (im-pri' mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things).

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through personal endeavor of a kind not scholastic, and through a state of mind, perhaps, like that of Democritus, the laughing philosopher. But these goals are not the primary concern of real schools, colleges, and universities.

Once I undertook my private survey of the opinions of parents of children, and of the opinions of school-board members, in my part of Michigan. I asked a good many such people what they considered the most important function of their schools. Why did they support those schools? What activity in those schools did they find most interesting?

One response, it turned out, was more general than was any other answer. What did these people, these adult products of the American educational apparatus, believe to be the most worthy achievement of their schools? Why, the basketball games. When pressed for a reason, those who responded informed me that games were good for the health of young people—or of those permitted to play on the teams, anyway; and besides, the night games supplied free entertainment for the local public.

You may perceive here what I mean by “decadence,” the loss of an object. Almost nobody with whom I conversed mentioned wisdom and virtue as objects of public instruction. Yet perhaps we are just beginning to recover from this delusion that formal education means fun and games; perhaps the public grows vaguely aware that something has gone wrong with the moral and the intellectual order of our culture, and that there ought to be more to education than games and sociability.

If one wishes to defend the general public's indifference toward the true ends of learning, it may be argued that the average American parent is a hungry sheep—or a sheep, anyway—who looks up and is not fed. If we are to take professors of education for the shepherds of this sheepwalk, surely those gentlemen and scholars, as a breed, have offered little imaginative guidance. And this observation leads us to the second form of sickness in the realm of education: to the disease of theory.

The Americans, says Alexis de Tocqueville, tend always to neglect the general for the particular: that is, they shy away from theory. A pragmatic attitude dominated the United States before the term “pragmatism” was coined among us. When a nation achieves great power and corresponding responsibilities never-

theless, sometimes people must refer to first principles. In no other aspect of life has a vulgarized pragmatism—raised to an orthodoxy in education by certain disciples of John Dewey—accomplished more damage to thought and action than in the domain of American schooling.



We have with us Professor Sidney Hook, the stoutest defender of Dewey's thought. But Dr. Hook mordantly criticizes the excesses or misunderstandings

of many educationists who consider themselves Dewey's inheritors. Often Dewey the innovator has become Dewey the dead hand, lying heavy upon the lower learning and the higher. In Dewey's name, at any rate, the notions of "socialization", "life adjustment", "permissive approaches", and the like have done much to break down intellectual and ethical disciplines.

But cheerfulness will keep breaking in. No longer do all Americans take for a sign of health the passion for compelling young people to "adjust" to modern society; indeed, the revolt of the young against such "adjustment" strongly suggests that such theories work their own ruin. If the time is out of joint, conformity to vulgar errors is sin and shame.

The aim of the "life adjustment" enthusiasts—as summarized ironically by a disgruntled superintendent of schools whom I know—has been to subject all young people to a uniform (although nearly formless) curriculum of "socialization," and thus to turn out a standard product, The American, who will be cooperative in a new society of Togetherness. Mixed up with this scheme has been the trauma of the Natural Goodness of Man, or Perfectibility.

Confronted by hot criticism, the masters of the American public-school apparatus have made some gestures of appeasement to "traditionalists" on the one hand, and to "radicals" on the other. Holding office, these masters are difficult to move greatly. Here and there concessions have been made by them, tardily, to permit special treatment for the "gifted child", though they remain fonder far of special treatment for the "culturally disadvantaged." They continue to mutter their familiar incantations: preparation for a changing world, education for leisure, reconstruction of society through new schools for better learning, the forming of The American, shaping "patterns for democratic society," and all the rest.

Many members of the American educationist establishment, and their counterparts in other quarters of the world, do not seem to be thinking of our present troubled year when they talk of adjustment: they are thinking of 1900, or 1910. At best, they think of those glorious days when they became doctors of education. Dewey's instrumentalism remains their

ideology; but they fail to apply the pragmatic test to their own lives and careers. For such dull dreamers, the reluctant taxpayer is the chief remaining obstacle to perfection through Holy Education. In a time when (in Yeats' phrase) "the worst are full of passionate intensity," when schools are tormented by arsonists, narcotics peddlers, and violent ideologues, these gentlemen go on recommending that we settle snugly into the warm collectivity of modern existence. To read the books and articles of many of them, even today, one might not guess that the world has been falling apart ever since 1914.

This is a dreary failure of imagination. Any society depends for the mere mechanics of its functioning—and for much else—upon the maintenance of a certain level of imagination and integrity among the people who made decisions, great or small. And any society depends for the foundation and scaffolding of its intellectual life, as for much else, upon the accumulated wisdom of our intellectual and moral patrimony. It may tickle an educationist's fancy to pose as an omniscient director of politics, morals, and metaphysics. But then, as during the past decade, up starts Sansculotte, "many-headed, fire-breathing, crying 'What think ye of me?'"

At the beginning of our century, in his first book, Irving Babbitt foresaw what was to happen upon every level of American education in the dawning age:

"The firmness of the American's faith in the blessings of education is equalled only by the vagueness of his ideas as to the kind of education to which these blessings are annexed. One can hardly consider the tremendous stir we have been making about education, the time and energy and enthusiasm we are ready to lavish on educational undertakings, without being reminded of the words of Sir Joshua Reynolds: 'A provision of endless apparatus, a bustle of infinite inquiry and research, may be employed to evade and shuffle off real labor—the real labor of thinking.'"

What Babbitt predicted then is upon us now. Perhaps a grand act of will—or rather, a series of such acts, preceded by serious reflection, on the part of many of us—may yet redeem modern education. Some people suggest that we may have to abandon established "Education," as a kind of quasi-religion

or mass-production business offering next to nothing for mind and conscience. Let the usurpers have it, these writers say. The awakening of imagination, by the discipline of intellect, may have to be undertaken by new voluntary associations, in defiance of the Educationist Establishment.

We have seen during the past decade a violent rebellion of many among the rising generation against the regime of dullness and complacency that long dominated American schooling, and which is little reformed today. The young rebels were bored with what they had been taught; they embraced shallow ideology as a relief from boredom. For the most part, the violence has subsided for the present. But unless we offer the rising generation something more satisfying than the typical "social stew" curriculum, once more external events may set fire to ideological impulses.

School, college, and university, for several decades, have been ineffectual in preparing their students for **making considered judgments upon public concerns**. At the school level—and even in many college textbooks and classes—political socialization too often has amounted to little more than the imparting of a kind of ethos of sociability, with a faint aroma of *Animal Farm*. The rising generation has been assured, for instance, that there is but one tolerable form of government anywhere, democracy (most vaguely defined or described); that practically anything ever done by "we Americans" has been wise and blameless, except for minor activities by isolated robber-barons and ephemeral crypto-imperialists; that American "problems" are mostly of a material sort, to be solved by positive legislation; that in foreign affairs, little is necessary but to trust in the omniscience of the United Nations. Such, at any rate, was the character of this instruction until Sansculotte took a hand. It was small wonder that students grew bored or resentful at this bland intellectual diet. Abandoning this form of unreality, many of them embraced another form of unreality—fanatic ideology.

So of the many programs of reform which ought to be commenced, I think it especially important to reunite the ethical understanding with the study of society. Economics moves upward into politics, politics upward into ethics. A political structure without discernible ethical foundation will attract little interest or loyalty among young people; students in both college and high school are starved for first principles today—and many of them know it. It will not do to talk windily of "the essential rightness of democracy" or of "the religion of democracy", as platitudinous substitutes for political philosophy, historical consciousness, and clear knowledge of social institutions.

Aye, this may be so; or possibly there remains to us hope for reformation of school, college, and university. So turn we now to restoration. My time being limited, let me confine myself here to recovery of reason and imagination in social studies.



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It does not follow that such introduction to the principles of order—the inner order of the soul, and the outer order of the commonwealth—need be abstract. The ethical imagination may be moved, particularly in early life, through the instrument of biography—by which I do *not* mean simple panegyric. And a thorough-going course in the history of ideas, at the high school level, would be preferable to the repetitious “civics” and “problems of democracy” courses now prevalent. As a survey a few years ago by Mr. Kenneth P. Langston and Mr. M. Kent Jennings indicated, juniors and seniors in the typical high school have been acquiring next to no additional knowledge of social concerns through the usual courses in American government and history, and the like; nor have they been acquiring any additional interest in public affairs. A quite different approach appears to be required at this level—in part because the same thing already has been done in earlier grades.

We may need a study of moral philosophy, if you will, as related to social institutions. I confess that we stand ill prepared for such a recovery. Among political scientists and sociologists and even professors of history, the dominant modes of thought are behavioristic and institutional; this intellectual climate of opinion therefore overshadows the teachers’ colleges and the secondary schools, too. Behaviorism amounts to little more (except for the half-unconscious prejudices of its practitioners) than a cataloguing of opinion and phenomena; institutionalism often has declined into dry recitation. Little place remains for philosophy, and for the moral imagination. Even should we commence today, our results would not be apparent in colleges for some years, and in high schools no sooner. Such a reform will not much affect the immediate conduct of American foreign policy, say, and so will not satisfy the votaries of “relevance.” But there always will be wars and rumors of wars, and the high and grim decisions which the American republic must make will not diminish with the elapse of decades.

Along with the reinvigoration of programs of social studies, we must much improve the education of teachers in such disciplines. We must have fewer courses in educational techniques, and more and better courses in genuine history, genuine politics, and genuine philosophy. There must be less reliance upon the crib, by teacher and by student.

Politics, after all, is the application of ethics to the concerns of the commonwealth. Politics cannot be apprehended properly without reference to biographical and historical models for order, justice, and freedom; nor without reference to theory. Any community, great or small, is knit together by belief in certain enduring norms or principles. When knowledge of those norms dwindles, the fabric of society wears thin. Lacking a knowledge of the permanent things, a people become interested chiefly in immediate self-interest; and “good natured, unambitious men,” as George Bernard Shaw put it, “stand by in helpless horror” at the consequences of this triumph of the ravenous ego.

Here I have suggested only the bare bones of a reform in the teaching of social studies; other disciplines require a parallel regeneration. Decadence never is inevitable, so long as a tolerable number of people retain the elements of right reason, and a will to survive. The need for reinvigoration of the discipline of humane letters is at least as urgent as that need in the social studies.

University, college, and high school all suffered from far too much impulsive action during the past decade: anti-intellectual action. The highest sort of action, as Aristotle suggests, is intellectual action. We cannot repeat too often the admonition of Demosthenes to the Athenians, then about to dash into violent action: “In the name of God, I beg of you to *think!*” That is what education is all about—thinking, which may lead toward wisdom and virtue.

Has education in America been a democratic triumph or an egalitarian disaster? Neither, as yet—although we have been sliding in recent years toward the latter. Education, I suggest, ought not, *per se*, to be “democratic” or “aristocratic”: that would be to impose political forms and slogans upon the ordering of intellect and character. Educate the rising generation well in politics, and the political institutions of any people will benefit—whether those institutions are democratic or not. Educate the rising generation well ethically, and political forms may matter comparatively little.

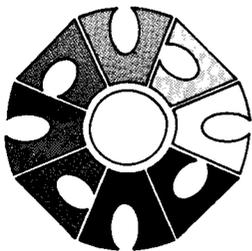
Democracy may be improved by genuine education, but education will not be improved by forcing it into

a political mold; we have had far too much politicizing of schools already. And intellectual talents and appetites being unequal, we fall into grave error if we attempt to make schools and colleges a kind of cauldron for brewing equality of condition; this point has been put ably by Dr. Christopher Jencks, recently. Genuine education is the advancement of right reason, for reason's sake. If the choice had to be made, T. S. Eliot wrote once, it would be better to educate well a comparatively few people than to educate everybody shoddily; for in the former circumstances, at least we would enjoy some competent leadership. An egalitarian disaster has not yet occurred in this country, because in fact we have not yet altogether abandoned the older understanding of education as an intellectual means to an ethical end. Once we systematically and deliberately convert schooling into a means for achieving equality of condition—which seems to be the object of the federal judge at Denver in the Denver "busing" decision, now appealed to the Supreme Court—we will achieve, in fact, only mediocrity of mind and character. And no democracy can endure if it rests upon intellectual apathy and indifference.

We have succeeded in schooling a great many people—too many, at college and university levels, because neither their own interests nor the employ-

ment-market justify today so grand a production of people with academic degrees. We have not yet succeeded in educating a great many people—for which sorry fact the declining sales of serious books are some evidence. We have not developed so successful a system of popular instruction as Switzerland has, nor yet so admirable a system of higher education as Britain used to have. The typical product of our schools and colleges is mediocre intellectually—no triumph, no disaster.

But the times demand more than mediocrity. Our failure to quicken imagination accounts, in large part, for our national difficulties, now formidable. Our public men tend to lack moral imagination and strength of will; our communities grow ugly and violent because vision and courage are wanting. Mediocrity in a pattern of education may not be disastrous in itself, and yet it may contribute gradually to private and public decadence. Mediocre appeals for "excellence" will not suffice, in the absence of real educational reform. Who at P.S. 137 really aspires to impart wisdom and virtue? Who at Behemoth University has any time for such abstract ends? And yet if those with power in the educational establishment remain unconcerned with wisdom and virtue, the ethos of sociability and material success will evaporate gradually, or perhaps swiftly—leaving a vacuum, possibly to be filled by force and a master.



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In a recent letter to the members of the American Conservative Union, Mr. M. Stanton Evans, chairman of the ACU, urged the membership to subscribe to IMPRIMIS. Mr. Evans, who is editor of the *Indianapolis News* and a renowned author, went on to say:

"I might add a note about Hillsdale College itself: This is a private liberal arts school founded in 1844 which throughout its history has refused, on principle, to accept a cent of government money whether state, federal, or local. The Center for Constructive Alternatives, located at Hillsdale, stresses the moral and spiritual values which undergird the free society and is doing an excellent job in defense of our traditional liberties."

Mr. Evans was a valued participant in the first seminar of the Center for Constructive Alternatives, *Recycling the City: Alternatives to Decay*.