

VOLUME IX

DARE PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION BE PROGRESSIVE?

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In choosing the title for my address this evening I have had no desire to be sensational or unnecessarily critical. On the contrary, I am merely registering a genuine concern regarding the future of what seems to be the most promising movement above the educational horizon. This movement holds out so much promise that its friends must insist on high accomplishment. The Progressive Education Association includes among its members more than its share of the boldest and most creative figures in American education. My hope is that it will not dissipate its energies or fail to measure up to its great opportunities. But, if it is to fulfill its promise, it must lose some of its easy optimism and prepare to deal more fundamentally, realistically, and positively with the American social situation than it has done up to the present moment.

In making this statement, I am aware that I may be misunderstood and even that I may not be speaking the whole truth. To represent adequately any complex phenomenon in a sentence or two is, of course, impossible. The Progressive Education movement embraces so many different elements, that any single characterization is certain to present a too simple picture of reality and thus to convey an incorrect or, at least, a partial impression. Nonetheless, being narrowly limited in time, and knowing that I am among friends, I shall speak somewhat dogmatically and with

few qualifications. I trust that there will be no misunderstanding. If what I say seems to you to rest on defective knowledge, or on some serious misconception, you have only yourselves to blame, because you invited me to speak here this evening. I can but present the situation as I see it.

In the minds of most Americans, the Progressive Education movement, in spite of its complexity, does stand for certain rather definite things. Moreover, few would deny that it has a number of large achievements to its credit. It has focused attention squarely upon the child; it has recognized the fundamental importance of the interest of the learner; it has defended the thesis that activity lies at the root of all true education; it has conceived learning in terms of life situations and growth of character; it has championed the rights of the child as a free personality. All of this is excellent; but in my judgment it is not enough. It constitutes too narrow a conception of the meaning of education; it brings into the picture but one half of the landscape.

If educational movement, or anything else, calls itself progressive, it must have orientation, it must possess direction. The very word itself means moving forward; and moving forward can have little meaning in the absence of clearly defined purposes. We cannot, like Stephen Leacock's horseman, dash off in all directions at once. Nor can we, like our presidential candidates, evade every important issue and be all things to all men.

You may reply that this sounds very interesting but that it has little bearing on the subject of Progressive Education. You may argue that the movement does have orientation, that it is devoted to the development of the *good* individual. But there is no good individual apart from some conception of the nature of good society. Man without human society and human culture is not man. And there is also no *good* education apart from some conception of the nature of the good society. Education is not some pure and

mystical essence that remains unchanged from everlasting to everlasting. On the contrary, it is of the earth and must respond to every convulsion or tremor that shakes the planet. It must always be a function of time and circumstance.

The great weakness of Progressive Education lies in the fact that it has elaborated no theory of social welfare, unless it be that of anarchy or extreme individualism. In this, of course, it is but reflecting the viewpoint of the members of the liberal-minded upper middle class who provide most of the children for the Progressive schools -- persons who are fairly well off, who have abandoned the faiths of their fathers, who assume an agnostic attitude towards all important questions, who pride themselves on their open mindedness and tolerance, who favor in a mild sort of way fairly liberal programs of social reconstruction, who are full of good will and humane sentiment, who have vague aspirations for world peace and human brotherhood, who can be counted upon to respond moderately to any appeal made in the interest of elemental human rights, who are genuinely distressed at the sight of unwonted forms of cruelty, misery, and suffering, who serve to soften the bitter clashes of those real forces that govern the world; but who, in spite of all their good qualities, have no deep and abiding loyalties, who possess no convictions for which they would sacrifice over-much, who would find it hard to live without their customary material comforts, who are rather insensitive to the accepted forms of social injustice, who are content to play the rôle of interested spectator in the drama of human history, who refuse to see reality in its harsher and more disagreeable forms, and who, in the day of severe trial, will follow the lead of the most powerful and respectable forces in society, and, at the same time, find good reasons for so doing. These people have shown themselves entirely incapable of dealing with any of the great crises of our time -- war, prosperity, or depression. At the bottom they are romantic sentimentalists. That they may be trusted to write our educational theories and shape our educational programs would seem highly

improbable.

Among the members of this class the birthrate is low, the number of children small, the income relatively high, and the economic functions of the home greatly reduced. For this reason an inordinate emphasis on the child and child interests is entirely welcome to them. They wish to guard their offspring from too strenuous endeavor and from coming into too intimate contact with the grimmer aspects of industrial society. Moreover, they wish their sons and daughters to succeed according to the standards of their class and to be a credit to their parents. Also, at heart feeling themselves members of a superior breed, they do not want their children to mix too freely with children of the poor or of the less fortunate races. Nor do they want them to accept radical social doctrines or espouse unpopular causes. According to their views, education should deal with life, but with life at a distance or in a highly diluted form. Indeed they would generally maintain that life should be kept at arm's length, if it should not be handled with a poker.

If Progressive Education is to be genuinely progressive, it must emancipate itself from the influence of this class, face squarely and courageously every social issue, come to grips with life in all of its stark reality, establish an organic relation with the community, develop a realistic and comprehensive theory of welfare, fashion a compelling and challenging vision of human destiny, and become somewhat less frightened than it is today at the bogeys of *imposition* and *indoctrination*. In a word, Progressive Education cannot build its program out of the interests of the children: it cannot place its trust in a child-centered school.

The need for the founding of Progressive Education on an adequate social theory is peculiarly imperative today. We live in troublous times; we live in an age of profound change; we live in an age of revolution. Indeed, it is highly doubtful whether man ever lived in

a more eventful period than the present. In order to match our epoch we would probably have to go back to the fall of ancient empires, or even to that unrecorded age when men first abandoned the simple arts of hunting and fishing and trapping and began to experiment with agriculture and the settled life. Today we are witnessing the rise of civilization quite without precedent in human history -- a civilization which is founded on science, technology, and machinery, which possesses the most extraordinary power, and which is rapidly making the entire world a single great society. As a consequence of forces already released, whether in the field of economics, politics, morals, religion, or art, the old molds are being broken. And the peoples of the earth are seething with strange ideas and passions. If life were peaceful and quiet and undisturbed by great issues, we might, with some show of wisdom, center our attention on the nature of the child. But with the world as it is, we cannot afford for a single instant to remove our eyes from the social scene.

In this new world that is forming, there is one set of issues which is peculiarly fundamental, and which is certain to be the center of bitter and prolonged struggle. I refer to those issues which may be styled economic. President Butler has well stated the case: "For a generation and more past," he says, "the center of human interest has been moving from the point which it occupied for some four hundred years to a new point which it bids fair to occupy for a time equally long. The shift in the position of the center of gravity in human interest has been from politics to economics; from considerations that had to do with forms of government, with the establishment and protection of individual liberty, to considerations that have to do with the production, distribution, and consumption of wealth."

Consider the situation in which we find ourselves today. How the gods must laugh at human folly! And who among us, if he had not been reared among our institutions, could believe his eyes as he

surveys the economic situation, or his ears as he listens to solemn disquisitions by our financial and political leaders on the cause and cure of the depression! Here is a society in which a mastery over the forces of nature, surpassing the wildest dreams of antiquity, is accompanied by extreme material insecurity; in which dire poverty walks hand in hand with the most extravagant living that the world has ever known; in which an abundance of goods of all kinds is coupled with privation, misery, and even starvation; in which an excess of production is seriously offered as the underlying cause of severe physical suffering; in which breakfastless children march to school past bankrupt shops laden with rich foods gathered from the ends of the earth; in which strong men by the millions walk the streets in a futile search for employment and, with the exhaustion of hope, enter the ranks of beaten men; in which so-called captains of industry close factories without warning and dismiss the workmen by whose labors they have amassed great fortunes through the years; in which automatic machinery increasingly displaces men and threatens the economic order with a growing contingent of the permanently unemployed; in which racketeers and gangsters, with the connivance of public officials, fasten themselves on the channels of trade and exact toll at the end of the machine gun; in which economic parasitism, either within or without the law, has become so easy for the cunning and the ruthless that the tradition seems to be taking root that "only saps work"; in which the wages paid to the workers are too meagre to enable them to buy back the goods they produce; in which consumption is subordinated to production and the science of psychology is employed to fan the flames of desire; in which a governmental commission advises cotton growers to plow under every fourth row of cotton in order to bolster up the market; in which both ethical and esthetic considerations are commonly overridden by "practical" men bent on material gain; in which the dole to the unemployed is opposed on the grounds that it will pauperize the masses when the favored classes, through the institution of interest, have always lived on the dole; in which our most

responsible leaders, not knowing what to do, resort to the practices of the witch doctor and vie with one another in predicting the return of prosperity; in which an ideal of rugged individualism, evolved in a simple pioneering and agrarian order at a time when free land existed in abundance, is used to justify a system, which exploits pitilessly and without thought of the morrow, the natural and human resources of the nation and the world. One can only imagine what Jeremiah would say if he could step out of the pages of the Old Testament and cast his eyes over this

But the point should be emphasized, that the present situation is full of promise, as well as menace. Our age is literally pregnant with possibilities. There lies within our grasp the most humane and majestic civilization ever fashioned by any people. At last men have achieved such a mastery over the forces of nature that wage slavery can follow chattel slavery and take its place among the relics of the past. No longer are there any grounds for the contention that the finer fruits of human culture must be nurtured upon the exploitation of the masses. The limits set by nature have been so extended that for practical purposes we may say that we are bound merely by our own ideals, by our power of self-discipline, and by our ability to devise social arrangements suited to an industrial age. If we are to believe what our engineers tell us, the full utilization of modern technology should enable us to produce several times as much goods as were ever produced at the very peak of prosperity, and with the working day, the working year, and the working life reduced by half. In other words, we hold within our hands the power to usher in an age of plenty, to make secure the lives of all, and to banish poverty forever from the land.

The achievement of this goal, however, would seem to require fundamental changes in the economic system. Historic capitalism, with its deification of the principle of selfishness, its reliance upon the forces of competition, its placing of property above human rights, and its exaltation of the profit motive, will either have to be

displaced altogether, or so radically changed in form and spirit that its identity will be completely lost. In view of the fact that the urge for private gain tends to debase everything that it touches, whether business, recreation, religion, art, or friendship, the indictment against capitalism might well be made on moral grounds. And these are the grounds on which the attack has commonly been made in the past. Today, however, capitalism is proving itself weak at the very point where it has generally been thought impregnable – in the organization and the maintenance of production. In its present form capitalism is not only cruel and inhuman; it is also wasteful and inefficient. It has exploited our natural riches without the slightest regard for the future; it has made technology serve the interests of the profit motive; it has chained the engineer to the vagaries of the price system; it has plunged great nations of the world into a succession of wars, ever more devastating and catastrophic in character; and only recently, it has brought on a world crisis of such dimensions that millions of men in all of the great industrial countries have been thrown out of work and a general condition of paralysis pervades the entire economic order. Obviously, the growth of science and technology has reached a point where competition must be replaced by coöperation, the urge for profits by careful planning, and private capitalism by some form of socialized economy.

Changes in our economic system will, of course, require changes in our ideals. The individualism of the pioneer or the farmer, produced by free land, great distances, economic independence, and a largely self-sustaining family economy, is already without solid foundation in either agriculture or industry. The free land has long since disappeared, the great distances have been shortened immeasurably by invention, the economic independence survives only in the traditions of our people, and the self-sustaining family economy has been swallowed up in a vast society which disregards the boundaries of nations. Already we live in an economy which, in its function, is fundamentally coöperative. There merely remains

the task of reconstructing our economic forms and of reformulating our social ideals so that they may be in harmony with the underlying facts of life. The man who would live unto himself alone is now a public enemy; the day of individualism in the economic sphere is gone.

To those who fear that the development of a coördinated, planned, and socialized economy may be accompanied by a severe curtailment of personal freedom, there are several things to be said. That under such an economy the actions of the individuals in certain directions would be limited is fairly obvious. No one would be permitted to build a new factory or railroad wherever he pleased; also no one would be permitted to amass great riches by manipulating the economic institutions of the country. On the other hand, by means of the complete and uninterrupted functioning of the economic system the foundations could be laid for the a measure of freedom in the realm of personal life that mankind has never known in the past. Freedom without a secure economic base is simply no freedom at all. Thus, in comparison with the right to work and eat, the right to vote is but an empty bauble. Today only the plutocracy have freedom with an economic support; and even in their case this freedom may be rather precarious. If all of us could be assured of material security and abundance, we would be released from economic worries and our minds set free to grapple with the really important questions of life – the intellectual, the moral, and the esthetic. The point should also be made that the full utilization of modern technology, a condition on which our entire argument rests, requires the planning and coördination of economic processes. We might, of course, resolve to retire into the simple agrarian society of the past; but we could scarcely hope to persuade many of our fellow men to follow us. And, no doubt, those few who might make such a resolution would like to take with them certain of the fruits of industrialism – bathtubs, electricity, and various labor-saving devices.

The problem of the reconstruction of our economic order, however, is not the only problem that we face. Profound changes in this realm are being accompanied and must be accompanied by equally profound changes in other fields. Life cannot be divided neatly into a number of separate compartments. The reduction of the hours of labor and the ushering in of an age of material abundance must have severe repercussions in the spheres of art, government, morals, and religion. Indeed, we see this very thing happening in contemporary society today. And while in the present paper attention is centered on the economic question, our educational theory will have to embrace the entire range of life. It will have to deal, not only with labor and income and property, but also with leisure and recreation, sex and family, government and public opinion, race and nationality, war and peace, art and esthetics.

When I say that Progressive Education should face all of these questions I do not mean merely that provision should be made in our progressive schools for children to study the problems of economics, government, and so on. This much, of course, should be done. But unless the Progressive Education movement wishes to change its name to the Contemplative Education movement, the Goodwill Education movement, or the Hopeful Education movement, it should go further. To my mind, a movement honestly styling itself progressive should engage in the positive task of creating a new tradition in American life – a tradition possessing power, appeal, and direction. James Truslow Adams has pointed out in his *Epic of America* that our chief contribution to the heritage of the race lies not in the field of science, or technology, or politics, or religion, or art, but rather in the creation of what he calls the American Dream – a vision of a society in which the lot of the common man will be made easier and his life enriched and ennobled. If this vision has been a moving force in our history, as I believe it has, then why should we not set ourselves the task of reconstituting and revitalizing it? This would seem to be the great

need of our age, both in the realm of education and in the sphere of public life, because men must have something for which to live. Agnosticism, skepticism, and even experimentalism, unless the latter is given a more positive definition than has come to my attention, constitute an extremely meagre spiritual diet for any people. To be sure, a small band of intellectuals, a queer breed of men at best, may be satisfied with such a spare ration, but the masses, I am sure, will always require something more substantial and colorful. Ordinary men and women crave a tangible purpose for which to strive and which lends richness and dignity and meaning to life. I would consequently like to see Progressive Education come to grips with the problem of creating a tradition that has roots in American soil, is in harmony with the spirit of the age, recognizes the facts of industrialism, appeals to the most profound impulses of our people, and takes into account the emergence of world society.

But, you will say, is this not leading us out upon very dangerous ground? Is it not taking us rather far from the familiar landmarks bounding the fields that teachers are wont to cultivate? My answer is, of course, in the affirmative. This, however, does not, in my judgment, constitute a serious objection to what I propose. If we are content to remain where all is safe and quiet and serene, we shall dedicate ourselves, as teachers have commonly done in the past, to a rôle of relatively complete futility, if not of positive social reaction. Neutrality with respect to the great issues that agitate society, while perhaps theoretically possible, is practically tantamount to giving support to the most powerful forces engaged in the contest.

You will say, no doubt, that I am flirting with the idea of indoctrination. And my answer is again in the affirmative. Or, at least, I should say that the word does not frighten me. We may all rest assured that the younger generation in any society will be thoroughly imposed upon by its elders and by the culture into

which it is born. For the school to work in a somewhat different direction with all the power at its disposal could do no great harm. At the most, unless the superiority of its outlook is unquestioned, it can serve as a counterpoise to check and challenge the power of less enlightened or more selfish purposes.

I would also have you observe that a tradition does not necessarily close the mind or dry up the springs of energy. Everything depends on its suitability to time and circumstance. Indeed, if it is suitable, it may illuminate the world, release the powers of youth, and fill every department of life with significance. Practically all great achievement, whether in hunting, war, sport, business, science, art, or religion, comes from the identification of the individual with some living and growing tradition. Such a tradition in the sphere of human relations, sustained by certain trends in our history and glorified by a vision of a future America, immeasurably more just and noble and beautiful than the society of today, should be the precious and inviolable birthright of every boy and girl born in the nation. To refuse to face the task of the creation of this tradition, is to evade the most crucial, difficult, and important educational responsibility. Also, unless we have undertaken this assignment, we are scarcely justified in opposing and ridiculing the efforts of the so-called patriotic societies to force upon the schools a tradition which, though narrow and unenlightened, nevertheless represents an honest effort to meet a profound spiritual need. But whether our Progressive schools, handicapped as they are by the clientele which they serve and the intellectualistic approach to life which they embrace, can become progressive in the genuine sense here suggested, would seem to be highly doubtful. Nevertheless, to my mind this is the central educational task of the age in which we live.

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