

# 23

## Liberal Education and the Common Man

It is said that there is a widespread loss of confidence in our schools, which can hardly be denied. The problem is, it is suggested, that education today is seen as the accumulation of knowledge, in contrast to the education of former times when it was more philosophical, in the sense that it was an education in the nature and order of things, or when it was at least based on a view of the nature and order of things.

I accept this general formulation—only suggesting in passing that the distinctive modern view of education is perhaps concerned not so much with accumulation of knowledge as with modes of inquiry. The notion that education ought to be more “philosophical” might be taken to mean, and often has been taken to mean, that what we need is more liberal education in the schools—I am thinking especially of high schools and college—and less narrow, technical, professional, and vocational education. We need less “training,” as the distinction often goes, and more “education,” and that usually means liberal education as that has been traditionally understood. To put the point yet more broadly, American democracy requires that citizens must be philosophers, as I heard a prominent educator say; and the way to make citizens philosophers is through universal liberal education.

That is the idea I want to investigate. I would contend, on the contrary, that one of the reasons for the loss of confidence in our schools is that this idea of universal liberal education is too prevalent already and that we are therefore asking our schools to do something that they should not be asked to do and that they cannot but do badly. My contention is that the common man is bad for liberal education and that liberal education is bad for the common man. Note that I am speaking about liberal education as it is conventionally

---

This previously unpublished essay was written for a conference at Hillsdale College, in Hillsdale, Michigan, February 1975.

understood. I will defend a liberalizing education for the common man, but I do not think that this is best found in liberal education as that is ordinarily understood.

I do not want to get involved, at this point, with the complex and ultimately profound questions about the meaning of "liberal education" or, indeed, of "the common man." I begin with the obvious, ordinary understandings, which are admittedly insufficient but which are usable and meaningful in the present context. By "liberal education" I mean an attempt to provide a significant exposure to and participation in the great cultural tradition of the West (at least); it is an education based upon reading the great books, studying the great men, viewing the great aspirations and achievements, exploring the great questions that represent the peaks of the art, literature, and thought of the West. By "the common man" I mean most people. I am thinking of the bulk of men, women, and children, perhaps 75 or 85 percent.

Obviously there can be many questions about where to draw the line and what subgradations might be appropriate; but we do not need to consider these questions here. One implication of the term "the common man" is of course that there are "uncommon men" and that there are many of the former and few of the latter. Men are not equal in all respects that are relevant for education. That does not, of course, in any way deny that the foundation of our educational system is, or ought to be if it is not, an equality of opportunity. But the educational superstructure is a series of distinctions and discriminations which respond to and develop the manifest inequalities that human beings display. One can say that the very end of liberal government is, as James Madison said, to protect the diverse and unequal faculties of men.

My first contention, then, is that liberal education in the traditional sense that I have referred to is not accessible to the bulk of mankind and that to try to make it accessible to them involves a tremendous watering down, with results that are bad for liberal education. Liberal education is education in the extraordinary. It is concerned with the heights of human achievement. Its materials are distinguished for their depth, learning, comprehensiveness, subtlety, and refinement—and these are not the characteristics of the ordinary mind. Woodrow Wilson once said that "the bulk of mankind is rigidly unphilosophical, and nowadays the bulk of mankind votes. A truth must become not only plain but also commonplace before it will be seen by the people who go to their work very early in the morning. . . ." But the extraordinary cannot be made commonplace without losing precisely whatever it is that made it extraordinary.

What worries me is that if your aim is Plato for the masses; if you shave down Aristotle to fit minds that are stretched by Walter Lippmann; if you treat Shakespeare as antique James Baldwin, then you will destroy the distinction between the ordinary (even when it is very good) and the heights and thereby the very ground of liberal education.

I think that the truth of the degradation that liberal education suffers when it is democratized is sufficiently obvious and needs little illustration. One can hardly imagine anything more damaging to liberal education in any meaningful sense than the travesties of it that are widely practiced in many of our high schools and so-called liberal arts colleges. A favorite example of mine, illustrating both the tendency and its danger, is a syndicated column once written by Mortimer Adler—I read it in the *Chicago Sun Times* in the early 1950s—on the Great Ideas, or some such title. Someone would write Adler a letter saying that he and his girlfriend discovered in the heat of a lovers' quarrel that they did not really know what "love" is, and could he help? Adler would then produce 750 words or so on the meaning of "love" as it had been understood by the Great Thinkers, scanning a half dozen writers from Plato to Freud. The writer of each letter selected for publication was sent a complete set of the Great Books; but it was never clear to me why anyone should bother reading those long and difficult books, when he could, apparently, get the gist of their thoughts in a daily newspaper column. This was liberal education in the time it takes to drink a glass of orange juice.

My point is not that liberal education is irrelevant to democracy—far from it—but that liberal education cannot itself be made democratic without losing those qualities that enable it to contribute to the elevation of taste and thought in a democracy. Some very interesting illustrations of this problem can be found in the activities of the National Endowment for the Humanities, for which I have great respect. In one of their programs a major effort is being made to bring the distinctive and relatively rare insights of "academic humanists" (the representatives of "liberal education" in our present sense) to bear on consideration of public policy in various forms of adult education. The idea seems altogether legitimate to me, and I was involved for a while in the program in Illinois. But what was striking was the pervasiveness of the view not merely that the humanists have something to contribute to discussions of public policy, but that the humanists really ought to get down out of their ivory towers altogether and spend their time in contact with the real people (mainly, it seems, in local taverns) and in solving the problems confronting society. To the extent that the guardians of liberal educa-

tion and the humanities yield to this kind of pressure—and they do not on the whole resist very well—liberal education decays into some form of democratic social engineering. And of course in the process the humanities tend to lose that aristocratic connection with the Western tradition that led the democracy to call upon them in the first place.

My point is, then, that precisely because there is an enormous pressure in a democracy to bring down liberal education to the level of the common man and his daily problems, there is a need for a special sensitivity to the distinction between the extraordinary and the ordinary and to ways in which that distinction can be maintained.

One of the problems in maintaining this distinction is that liberal education was traditionally the province of the small group of people who enjoyed leisure, as distinguished from the much larger group of people who had to work. Liberal education is for leisure; vocational education, or training, is for work. Since in the United States, with insignificant exceptions, we all work, there is a serious question about the status of liberal education in the traditional sense. We are driven to distinguish not between those who must work and those who do not but between those who must go to their work very early in the morning and those who can go to their work somewhat later. Or we find ways of subsidizing leisure, as some foundations and some programs of the National Endowment for the Humanities—and Arts, and Sciences—do, and as we try to do on a wider scale for the faculties at our universities and liberal arts colleges. There are some very serious questions, as I hope these examples suggest, about the project of maintaining liberal education in American democracy at all. I do not intend to follow this line of thought here, except to reiterate that the problem is to maintain the healthy tension between liberal education and democracy and that in practice that means finding ways to protect liberal education against being overwhelmed by the democratic impulse.

Let us consider the other side of the distinction between the leisured (or relatively leisured) few and the working many. For my contention is not only that the common man is bad for liberal education, in the sense I have described, but that liberal education is bad for the common man. I suggest that the common man in the United States has two primary characteristics and that his education should be primarily directed to them: he works for a living and he is a citizen of a democracy.

One of the best and most thoughtful educators of the common man in the United States was Booker T. Washington; and his educational principles are directly relevant to our present question. (I am

not here concerned with Washington's views about the relations between the races or about the politics of turn-of-the-century United States.) Washington called his educational scheme, learned at the Hampton Institute and fully developed at Tuskegee, "industrial education," education for work. He discouraged Negroes from taking up the "cultural" subjects, which were so appealing as evidence of "real" education, and urged them instead to begin with immediate needs, especially the need to earn a living. He was profoundly offended at the half-literate Negro preacher whose example was practically and morally debilitating to the people he was supposed to lead. He saw something grotesquely unfitting in the image of a slovenly young Negro man sitting in a weed-filled garden poring over a French grammar. Even apart from the strong probability that his French would never be good, such a youth was beginning, Washington insisted, at the wrong end. As the foundation of life for most people is work, so the foundation of education for most people should be industrial or vocational education.

This view seems to me altogether sound. Yet our high schools seem blindly committed to the notion that their primary goal is to teach the liberal arts. I know that there are outstandingly good vocational schools and courses in our high schools (and, ironically, that they are generally much harder to get into than the "liberal arts" schools); but on the whole, vocational education seems to be regarded as peripheral. Yet surely it is the schools in this case that are peripheral. One can hardly blame the ordinary teenage boy or girl for losing his respect for and interest in a school system that tries to teach him everything except what he most needs to know, that somehow implies that his desire to know how to do something that will enable him to earn his living is beneath the concern of his teachers. There is a widespread tendency in educational circles to denigrate vocational education as low, narrow, and merely technical, and to contrast it with the breadth and elevation of liberal education. But if, as I have suggested, it is vital to maintain liberal education and the possibility of liberal education in a democracy, it is also necessary to acknowledge the enormous role that education for work must play in any sensible scheme of universal education. Vocational education is the principal concern, I suggest, of education of the common man.

It is true, of course, that job training can be very narrow. But merely technical training is bad not because it is specialized and vocational but because it does not open up into anything broader or higher. That is not, however, an intrinsic defect. There is a perfectly natural way in which technical or vocational education can be broadening, and that is through reflection on the ends or aims to which it

points. When W. E. B. Du Bois criticized Booker T. Washington for propagating a Gospel of Work and Money, he did not grasp that Washington's view was that work and money were indeed necessary in themselves but that they were also the first step in moral and civic and liberalizing education for the common man.

Thus while liberal education begins with leisure, vocational or industrial education begins with the need to work. Washington taught his students how to work, how to earn their living. There followed a series of lessons that raised the students beyond mere work. He taught the worth of a job well done. He taught the need for order and discipline. He taught the meaning of freedom. "Those are most truly free today who have passed through great discipline. Those persons in the United States who are most truly free in body, mind, morals, are those who have passed through the most severe training—are those who have exercised the most patience and, at the same time, the most dogged persistence and determination."

Washington wanted to make men independent, to instruct them in the life of a free man. He did it in a way that was more meaningful than traditional liberal education, not only for turn-of-the-century Negroes but, I suggest, for most people most of the time; because the teaching was drawn out of the kind of concerns that are primary and natural for most people most of the time. Vocational has the same basic aim as liberal education, though the student body, the circumstances, and thus the means are different: it is the education of free men.

Industrial education could also be, Washington thought, liberalizing in the sense of opening up to the students, not only a higher morality and self-understanding, but also broader horizons and deeper understanding of the world, both natural and human. Properly understood, vocational education can be a form of liberal education—the best form for most people—rather than in opposition to it. Describing a commencement oration on cabbages by one of his Tuskegee students, Washington said, "As a matter of fact, there is just as much that is interesting, strange, mysterious, and wonderful; just as much to be learned that is edifying, broadening, and refining in a cabbage as there is in a page of Latin." The difference is that education in "cabbages" is also useful.

There are edifying, broadening, and refining lessons to be found in every vocational area. The secretary's need to know how to spell can be extended into an interest in words—where they come from, what they mean, and what they imply about the nature of things—and their grammatical relation. The vocational training of the engineer can be directed out through architecture and the visual arts to

beauty, and through city planning to the principles and ends of the polity. The nurse can be encouraged to draw on her nurse's training to extend her understanding of human psychology, of the promise and limits of the biological sciences, of life and the good life. Here, it seems to me, lies one of the major educational tasks of today: to find ways of liberalizing vocational education. And that does not mean mainly adding courses on "cultural" subjects. It means discovering and teaching and extending the liberalizing potential of vocational training.

Whereas vocational education, including its moral and liberalizing side, is concerned primarily with the private or individual life, the common man is also a citizen. And the second kind of education I have suggested for the common man is civic education. This distinction between the private man and the public man—a distinction with profound and problematic implications—is not always clear-cut. For example, one of the chief subjects of civic education is the American hero, especially American public men. Admiration for these men and what they stand for is part of the social bond, and their study should surely be near the center of civic education. At the same time, these men often serve also as models of how to live, and particularly how free men ought to live. One thinks, for example, of the autobiographies of Theodore Roosevelt or Booker T. Washington, both quite explicitly directed to teaching the ordinary man how to make the most of himself as an individual and as a citizen. As models of individual life, as well as of high citizenship, these American heroes are more limited than some of the models available in the great Western tradition. But they are immediately relevant; they are harmonious with the principles of the American polity; and they are elevating and broadening.

The most common objection to civic education is that it involves indoctrination which, it is said, conflicts with the aim of real education, which is to teach people how to think. Is there a conflict between civic education, which aims to make a good citizen, and liberal education, which aims to make a free man with a free mind? Again I do not propose to consider this question in its most profound reaches. But at least in our present context I do not think that the usual distinction between "indoctrination in values" and "teaching how to think" is so sharp or contradictory as might appear.

Not only does any teaching involve a kind of indoctrination (every educational institution, curriculum, and teacher stands for something), but any indoctrination, or any kind of indoctrination at issue here, involves teaching. The simple but powerful point is that human beings cannot be indoctrinated without giving them some

reasons, and reasons permit and even invite reasoning. What this suggests to me is not so much a sharp dichotomy between the inculcation of values and independent reasoning as a continuum or (better) a hierarchy. The problem of civic education is, surely, to inculcate healthy civic values, but to do so in a way that does not foreclose, that indeed encourages and assists, a questioning and thereby a deepened understanding of those values. In this way civic education too becomes liberalizing in what is essentially the same way that vocational education can be liberalizing. The Declaration of Independence, for example, must be a prime text of American civic education; it articulates the basis and the ends of the American polity. But the Declaration of Independence cannot be studied merely as an American document; it cannot be simply "received." It is grounded in reasonings based on what are said to be universal principles of human equality and human right. One cannot indoctrinate an American citizen without leading him to think about "nature and nature's god," "self-evident" truths, and "unalienable" rights.

I have said that the study of the American heroes ought to be near the center of American civic education. This means, in the first place, the propagation of what are usually called "myths" about great Americans. Happily, however, the American heroes *do* bear examination. Abraham Lincoln is the crucial example. The tendency today is to see Lincoln in terms of a rather sharp alternative, either as the Great Emancipator or as a self-seeking politician. Since the former is not simply true, we tend to assume that it is simply false. Thus arises the enthusiastic debunking of the myths of the old civics books that seems to be a favorite occupation of American historians.

But such a view is not only politically unhealthy—for a country without heroes is a country without principles or aspirations—it is also false. The truth about Lincoln consists in various levels or stages of understanding. At the first and simplest level there is the Lincoln who freed the slaves, the Great Emancipator. More study and understanding reveal that Lincoln was not altogether "above" ordinary politics: he was a shrewd and ambitious politician. At a still higher level, however, one learns about Lincoln's commitment to the preservation of the Union and his (startling) willingness to free or not to free slaves according to whether that would help or not help preserve the Union. Yet further, we learn why Lincoln wanted to preserve the Union, and discover that it was because of his well-reasoned conviction that Union was the best existing institution to protect and foster human freedom. Finally we may understand what Lincoln's defense of Union implied for Negro slavery and thus grasp the deeper truth that the original simple view of Lincoln as Great Emancipator



embodies, that Lincoln had (as Frederick Douglass put it) put himself "at the head of a great movement, and was in living and earnest sympathy with that movement, which, in the nature of things, must go on until slavery should be utterly and forever abolished in the United States."

This process of deepening the understanding of the primary truths of civic education is what is involved in good civic education. It is also a form of liberal education. The study of Lincoln, properly conducted, makes good citizens at the same time that it extends their horizons. It is no accident that Booker T. Washington's model was Abraham Lincoln and that both Washington and Lincoln were concerned preeminently with the question of freedom. There may be times and places where the pressing problem is an excess of civic indoctrination at the expense of adequate opportunity for questioning and thinking. I do not think that that is the problem in American education today, at either the secondary or the college levels. Our distinctive problem seems rather to be a loss of confidence in the legitimacy and necessity of providing educational support for the political and moral principles on which the country is based.

My conclusion, then, is that vocational education and civic education are the kinds of education needed by and suited to most people. To depreciate vocational and civic education or to push them to the periphery tends, it seems to me, to have three unfortunate results: (1) it tends to weaken the society's grasp on and respect for liberal education proper; (2) it tends to ignore or downgrade the major legitimate educational needs of most people, which is education for work and for citizenship; and (3) it tends to overlook the most relevant and solid vehicles for liberalizing education for the vast majority of the American people.