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On Educational Philosophy, Civil Rights, and the Schools

There are those in today's civil rights struggle who regard contemporary educators as exemplifying what Karl Mannheim called a

type of thought [having] relative remoteness from the open conflicts of everyday life; hence it is also 'scholastic' in this sense, i.e. academic and lifeless. This type of thought does not arise primarily from the struggle with concrete problems of life nor from trial and error, nor from experience in mastering nature and society, but rather much more from its own need for systematization. . . .¹

Indeed, they might put it even more strongly, invoking Max Weber's characterization of Confucianist scholarship —

the status ethic of prebendaries, of men with literary educations who were characterized by secular rationalism. If one did not belong to this *cultured* stratum he did not count.²

To be sure, there are some educators so absorbed in the routine of professional responsibilities as to create the impression of remoteness from and indifference to the great social and political upheavals of our age. Yet one need go no further than the writings and personal involvements of a John Dewey to appreciate how erroneous such an impression would be. Thus, Dewey said:

Only as the schools provide an understanding of the movement and direction of social forces and an understanding of social needs and of the resources that may be used to satisfy them will they meet the challenge of democracy.³

That educational philosophers in particular are vitally concerned with the social matrix of their thought and work is amply attested to by the themes of papers read at recent conferences of both the national and regional branches of the Philosophy of Education Society. Nonetheless, the very assiduity of their efforts to disengage value presuppositions from analysis may incur the charge of a mandarin-like preciosity, of an escapist obfuscation, of a callous evasion of responsibility in helping to overcome societal inequities. Against such denunciation as covert

¹Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1946), p. 10.

²H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 268.

³John Dewey, *Problems of Men* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 48.

intellectual allies of the old order, I can only express the hope that even the most ardent workers for social change will agree to draw an important distinction — namely, the difference between an alleged class or race-determined predilection for the value of truth and the logical truth-value of propositions themselves. Without such initial agreement, all effort at disciplined reasoning, at intellectual clarification of meanings is foredoomed, and questions of scientific truth are to be dismissed as, in the words of Sidney Hook, “expressions of historical taste or class bias.”⁴

In the last few years, the term “quality education” has entered the popular educational lexicon as signifying a high degree of excellence. More often than not, the term is injected into discourse for polemical purposes, suggesting a determination to reject its putative opposite, “quantity education,” or “saturation services.” If one may take liberties with a formula of the Marxian dialectic, the expression constitutes a flat denial that there is a critical point whereat quantity is transformed into quality. It is a declaration that wholesale proliferation of educational plant, albeit designed along advanced architectural lines, and elegantly equipped with the most scientific laboratories, gymnasias, auditoriums, lunchrooms and libraries will not suffice to win the seal of quality education. Nor will staffing of these schools with professionally prepared and dedicated teachers, enlightened administrators, qualified specialists in guidance, librarianship, nursing, and the like alter the rating. The crucial element that must be compresent with these other factors is multi-racial or bi-racial composition of student body.

The proposition is generally asserted in the form: “no quality education without integration.” The declared relationship is one of implication. But what kind of implication? Is a judgment regarding the preconditions of educational excellence one of pure postulation, on the order of Q if and only if I, where Q stands for so-called “quality education” and I for integration? Such a formal judgment is clearly non-falsifiable. All submitted empirical evidence regarding the alleged quality status of non-integrated schools A, B, C would be rejected out-of-hand as not conforming to the definitional stipulation of quality education.

Let us suppose, however, that “no quality education without integration” is taken to be an empirical judgment, asserting material implication. Such a relationship would logically permit the case that quality education obtains without racial integration being present. In justifying the empirical judgment that quality education is to be had only where integrated education obtains, one would first specify the stigmata of quality education. Presumably, among the hallmarks of quality education would be certain kinds of insights, certain types of motivation, certain tones of inter-personal relationships. By hypothesis

⁴Sidney Hook, *Reason, Social Myths, and Democracy* (New York: John Day, 1940), p. 40.

these qualia of quality education would be found demonstrably lacking in non-integrated schools. Nonetheless the protagonists of this position must be prepared to concede certain possibilities — 1) that there may be a non-integrated school exhibiting the pre-specified qualia of educational excellence, 2) that there may be an integrated school that does not qualify for conferral of the eulogistic designation, “quality.”

It is assumed that this latter possibility is readily conceded. Surely the proposition “no quality education without integration” in the form Not-I, then Not-Q, may not be construed to assert If I, then Q. I should think that advocates of educational integration are too sophisticated to be asserting the deducibility of quality education from integrated education — that is, that integration is a sufficient condition for the establishment of excellence in education.

We have been employing the term integrated education as though it carried a univocal meaning on its very face. That this is far from the case the slightest reflection will readily establish. Even in popular parlance, a distinction is drawn between *token* integration and *genuine* integration. But what are the requisite racial blendings to permit certification of a school as integrated? Beyond this one must inquire into the school's internal system of classification. Query whether desegregation *ipso facto* proscribes schemes of so-called homogeneous grouping — either on some over-all ability basis, or along lines of subject-matter aptitude — if the net effect is *de facto* racial segregation? Then there is the question of racial composition of faculty. Will there be more than ceremonial integration when teachers are overwhelmingly non-Negro? When the subject of our concern is the intangible one of social perception, what is the social-psychological effect upon pupils of a limited sprinkling of Negro personnel among white teachers and specialists?

But integration is not to be understood as merely the mechanical juxtaposition of individuals of diverse backgrounds — an oil and water combination, as it were. Hopefully, some genuine human fellowship — true integration — will emerge. Can integration occur without some central set of values and some common definitions of social reality? We have learned from Hollingshead's by now classic study, *Elmtown's Youth*, and other corroborative research, that

“the family and neighborhood sub-cultures not only set the stage upon which the child acts, but they also provide him with ways of acting and definitions of action . . . They provide him with roles, teach him how to play them, and accord him different status positions as he plays such roles as child in the family, pupil in the school, and little boy on the street . . . ”

Insofar as racial differences tend to coincide with class distinctions in our contemporary society, with all that this implies for a differentiated interpretation of social events, what are the prospects for perceptual integration? But, one may respond, does not the school provide that common structuring of experience from which may emerge common

criteria of value, common modalities of meaning construction, common avenues of communication? By way of rejoinder, I find myself concurring with Edgar Friedenberg⁵ who regards the lack of philosophical structure in our schools, schools with fragmented curricula and with mediating rather than clarifying conflict, as precluding attainment of the sought for integration. To this, I must append Paul Goodman's recent indictment of our schools, *Compulsory Mis-Education*,⁶ which, making due allowance for its exaggerations and sensationalism, hardly affords encouragement to the advocates of quality education with or without integration.

We must now examine the notion of equality in education, taking it as more than a slogan. In confronting an educational situation from the standpoint of equality, we must remind ourselves of the dictum of W. I. Thomas: that the definition of the situation is not identical for members of the in-group and for outsiders. Also apposite is the observation of Plato that with respect to unequals, equals become unequal. To bring the matter up to date, I shall draw upon the thinking of the late Alfred Schutz,⁷ a social philosopher of the phenomenological school. Schutz notes that members of a social group perceive reality in terms of systems of typifications and domains of relevance preconstituted at birth for any individual. Insofar as an implicit acceptance of these sets of typifications — otherwise described as a relative natural conception of the world — obtains, we may impute to members of the group a homogeneous self-typification. It is against the background of such modes of conceptualization that one must approach the notion of equality, and recognize that it has subjective as well as objective meaning. Herein is to be found the root of the fallacious thinking embodied in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, with its notorious "separate but equal" doctrine, as in part articulated: "If inferiority is inferred . . . it is not by reason of anything found in the act but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it . . ." Let it be granted that deliberate racial separation carries the badge of shame as an inescapable incident and we are compelled to adjudge such schemes as promotive of inequality.

Quite otherwise are those discriminations that turn upon the attributes and performances of individuals as such, irrespective of their majority or minority status. Here is an objective state of affairs, imposing specific demands upon the actors or agents involved, leading to consequences, susceptible of appraisal by means of publicly accepted instruments. To be sure, these instruments of evaluation are not sacrosanct, and are themselves liable to periodic reappraisal, modification and

⁵Edgar Z. Friedenberg, *The Vanishing Adolescent* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), pp. 44-52.

⁶Paul Goodman, *Compulsory Mis-Education* (New York: Horizon Press, 1964).

⁷Alfred Schutz, "Equality and the Meaning Structure of the Social World" in *Aspects of Human Equality*, Lyman Bryson et al, editors (New York: Harper & Bros, 1956).

possible abandonment. A case in point is the IQ test, long regarded as a sacred cow, and now undergoing a barrage of criticism.⁸ Nonetheless, the principle of individual difference itself is not under fire. Neither is its corollary, that for some purposes, such differences *do* make a difference, and must be protected from embroilment in inter-group disputes. Thus, assuming that professional competence is the decisive factor in the licensing of physicians, one might legitimately object to the conferral of licenses upon unqualified medical students of foreign nationality when this occurs as an adjunct of extraneous diplomatic considerations. By the same token, an appeal to the concept of equality by organized pressure groups should enjoy neither juridical nor ethical standing when its effect is to deny the discriminating judgments of connoisseurship relative to personal merit.

Historically, there is an American tradition of radical egalitarianism that has sought to obscure the differential qualities of individual citizens. Some aspects of Jacksonian democracy have lent themselves to this interpretation. The rationale of the spoils system took the form of asserting that one American could perform a governmental task as competently as his fellows — differences in ability and training notwithstanding. It took many decades of persistent civic campaigning before the merit concept made serious inroads into the American spoils system. Significantly, the Soviet Union experimented with the interchangeability of individuals for governmental and public utility assignments during its most doctrinaire Bolshevik phase, the period of so-called “war communism.” It would be ironic for our society to endorse a blurring of individual differences and a repudiation of distributive justice in the name of ill-conceived notions of equality.

That, in point of fact, there is a clear and present danger of sapping operations against the principle of individual merit is evidenced by the current activities of several pressure groups. Thus, there are *some* misguided civil rights organizations that now seek to abrogate the tuition-free status of students attending the City University of New York. The line of reasoning runs something like this: Whereas a formal equality of opportunity exists for all qualified New Yorkers to enroll in the City University, historic factors of “cultural deprivation” put the Negro at a decided competitive disadvantage. Hence, only a small percentage of Negroes can actually avail themselves of these municipal facilities. This being the case, the city treasury should not subsidize the education of the more affluent racial sector of the population. Moreover, the less money that is invested in tuition-free higher education, the more ample the funds available for elementary and secondary education, levels more within the realm of the total population.

It is fortunate that thus far only a fraction of the civil righters have inclined in this direction. On the other hand, some of those who would

⁸Nathaniel Hickerson, *Education for Alienation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), Chap. II.

vote in support of the present tuition arrangements in the New York city colleges, would dilute academic standards. By dilution, I do not refer to the acceptance of a limited number of special students, who, though not measuring up to official admission prerequisites, show promise. These probationaries would receive remedial coaching and personal counseling as an earnest of society's faith in their potential. By dilution I have in mind the retention as active degree candidates of students whose collegiate performance level is clearly unacceptable. Such leniency is justified in terms of remonstrance against the alleged educational disfranchisement of the Negro and the Puerto Rican. Again the appeal is to the competitive handicap suffered by the culturally underprivileged — the denizens of the slums — and the necessity of breaking through the vicious circle by an educational operation bootstrap. This preferential treatment is interpreted as positive justice, a true equality of opportunity.

Such a concession would of course be self-defeating. The high academic prestige enjoyed by the constituent colleges of the City University would be dissipated. Under a Gresham's Law, an exodus of scholarship would occur — both on the part of distinguished faculty and superior students alike. Moreover, students with high scholastic records but modest means would be compelled to borrow funds for tuition at other colleges — or else forego a higher education. Recipients of degrees awarded by the municipal colleges under these debased auspices would find that the depreciated diploma constituted but scant compensation for their efforts.

Some of the same thinking has penetrated the secondary level of education. I personally listened to a telephone conversation on NBC radio, in the course of which a complainant attacked the allegedly spurious integration of a New York City public high school. The allegation declared that this school made special provision for the academically gifted students and that these honors classes were almost totally lily-white in racial composition. For the sake of the record, I acknowledge that I am personally opposed to exclusive so-called ability grouping for pedagogic reasons too well known to require recitation. At least for a portion of an academic day, students should be brought together to share a common core of experiences. I should hope that good will and ingenuity would combine to bring forth new arrangements and procedures for enlarging the human perspectives of youth in democratic fellowship. But talent must not be jettisoned in homage to the lowest common denominator. It would be a bizarre irony for the proponents of quality education to expunge quality in the name of equality.

A sincere friend of integration has recently cautioned:

Large-scale transfers of Negro children to schools in white neighborhoods also raise questions whose answers are by no means obvious. Should the Negro children be put in heterogeneous classes in the new school, in which case they tend to perform at the bottom of the class if the school draws from

middle-class and upper-class families? Or should they be put in homogeneous classes, i.e., classes grouped according to academic ability — in which case they are again segregated in the new school? The latter seems pointless: nothing is gained by transporting youngsters several miles in order to keep them segregated. Yet dumping youngsters who are reading several years below grade level, as the New Rochelle experience suggests, is not likely to enhance the former group's ego nor lead to meaningful encounters between the two races.⁹

Talent is a social capital, domiciled in individuals, but with dividends potentially enjoyable by all. In varying degrees, talent is found within all men, sometimes hopelessly entombed, sometimes but partially developed. A major task of American education is the discovering and nurturing of talent, sweeping aside all irrelevant segregations in this endeavor. Equality of opportunity requires that everything be done by society to afford the maximization of the chances of self-realization for all.

Some of the civil-righters demand something other than this. Some would ask for "an equal start for everyone." That the initial handicaps suffered by whole categories of individuals may be so serious as to require some sort of societal compensatory action may be readily granted. I submit that the growing trend in the direction of publicly supported nursery schools in neighborhoods marked by cultural disadvantage is a step in this direction. For older children, the concept of the educational park should be tested experimentally — not as a panacea, but as a contribution towards enlarging educational opportunity. Nonetheless, such innovations, and others that will make their appearance in the decade ahead, are a far cry from a dogmatic radical leveling.

In a recent book that has attracted considerable attention, *The New Equality*, Nat Hentoff¹⁰ urges whites to "recognize their *own* community of interest with Negro action beyond civil rights so to open the society that everyone in it has the opportunity to be equal." Yet, Hentoff, combining veiled threat with an appeal to prudential considerations, appears to dismiss love and morality as significant factors promoting intelligent social action and change. Now Hentoff confronts a dilemma. A preference for the open society is precisely that order of choice which is congruous with considerations of morality and love. On the other hand, Machiavellian alliances in domestic power politics between white and Negro organized blocs will disintegrate whenever short-run considerations of partisan advantage prevail. What we require at this point is a sharper delimitation of Hentoff's universe of discourse. If he is stating what purport to be ethical sentences, he must explicate his terms with greater precision and map out a theory of moral justification. If, on the other hand, his assertions serve a non-moral linguistic function, this too needs clarification.

⁹Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in Black and White* (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 300.

¹⁰Nat Hentoff, *The New Equality* (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), p. 243.

In *The New Equality* we meet with the assumption that the category Negro is exhaustive of all those traits and differentia that constitute the personality of a particular individual. Or, to put it otherwise, whether one is talking about the person as parent, citizen, worker, artist, intellectual, employer, serviceman, or student, the qualifier Negro is the decisive one. I would vigorously challenge this assumption — as I would the equally unacceptable denial that for some purposes, as in appraising life chances, the classification Negro is a valid social fact. The Negro-white dichotomy is an artificial one, rooted in history but not in nature. I am optimistic that the Judaeo-Christian values, as amplified and particularized by the Western liberal tradition, still have enough vitality and meaningfulness to provide equal educational opportunity within the context of a liberal democratic polity.

Over three decades ago, George S. Counts hurled forth the challenge, "Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?" To the extent that this manifesto appeals for the establishment of a just and cooperative society, a leadership role for the educator is an ethical imperative. On the other hand, some of those who sound the tocsin apparently seek to institute some form of collectivism, and would utilize the schools as a Trojan Horse to that end. Whether or not collectivism is a desirable social order, this issue must be settled on its own merits. A determination of what cherished social values would be inconsonant with statist collectivism must be reached through independent appraisal. It is clear to me that classical liberalism, as an apologetic for the *laissez-faire* state, has outlived its usefulness. By the same token, I would argue that an affirmative liberalism which pays due regard to the economic component in democratic living, and which will safeguard civil liberties while augmenting civil rights, still has much to commend it. Back in 1935, John Dewey wrote an essay entitled "The Future of Liberalism," in which he said:

" . . . there is nothing in the nature of liberalism that makes it a milk-water doctrine, committed to compromise and minor 'reforms.' It is worth noting that the earlier liberals were regarded in their day as subversive radicals.

" . . . the question of method in formation and execution of policies is the central thing in liberalism. The method indicated is that of maximum reliance upon intelligence. This fact determines its opposition to those forms of radicalism that place chief dependence upon violent overthrow of existing institutions as the method of effecting desired social change. A genuine liberal will emphasize as crucial the complete correlation between the means used and the consequences that follow. The same principle which makes him aware that the means employed by pseudo-liberalism only perpetuate and multiply the evils of existing conditions makes him aware also that dependence upon sheer massed force as the means of social change decides the kind of consequences that actually result."

I submit that the above statement still has robust timeliness!

¹¹John Dewey, *op. cit.*, p. 138.