



THE RELATION OF THE STATE TO EDUCATION

BY WILLIAM THURSTON BROWN

III

V. OVERLOOKED FACTORS IN THE PROBLEM OF EDUCATION

WE HAVE had a glimpse of the beginnings of the American school system in early colonial history. We have seen how and why the conceptions and conditions of that remote period could neither forecast nor fashion a system of education suited to the transcendent needs of the 20th century. We have seen how absent-mindedly American statesmen and educators adopted a type of schooling such as German junkers had created for the purpose of ensuring the permanence of autocracy. We have also seen that for reasons *indigenous to political and economic control in America by its dominant commercial and financial interests*, dynamic education to fit a dynamic world has been almost completely barred from American schools of every grade, and the virtue of unthinking adherence to the demands of a plutocratic society have been almost universally exalted in their place. And finally, we have noted in the plain, incisive diction of one of our most distinguished thinkers what the rise of social science forecasts.

Think now, for a moment, what a challenging phenomenon an airplane view of our own nation reveals five days a week, nine or ten months in the year: this vast army of boys and girls between five and twenty-two making their way along country roads, through city streets, or on campus paths to certain buildings avowedly dedicated to the one purpose of education. What does this daily Processional of Youth signify to this nation? Does the American State, by *what it is or by any carefully thought-out provision*, show that it thinks of these boys and girls as a possibly *new nation*, as the potential artists, thinkers, leaders, pioneers in creating a *better, finer social order*? Or is there reason for thinking that the State to-day regards them chiefly as potential producers of wealth in factory, mine, mill, or office *which they do not share*, or as possible inheritors of wealth and power *which they have not earned*? In a word, does America, this so-called last frontier of civilization, regard these millions of our youth as *ends in themselves*, as that for which all else in America has its justification—or rather as means for the enrichment of the *economically clever and the politically cunning*?

Further, what are these millions of boys and girls, as yet

ignorant of any clear meaning for them in the social scene, destined inevitably and perhaps irrevocably to find in these school buildings? What will these potential citizens be like when they emerge five, ten, fifteen years later? Will any considerable number of them find these buildings *prisons of the intellect, rigid moulds in which the fluent material of youth will harden into forms inherited from a narrow and ignorant past*? Or will they find them inviting doorways to inspiring adventure, pathways to new worlds of consciousness, fulfillment, life? Will they find therein wardens, guards, slave-drivers, antiques in human form? Or will they find in their teachers *comrades, companions of the open road, fellow-builders of a nobler social order*?

Do these questions seem far-fetched, out of place in America? Recall then two sentences which form the very essence of an address delivered in 1883 at Yale University by one of the admittedly greatest *statesman-educators* of this nation—Andrew Dickson White, first President of Cornell University, and our ambassador successively to Germany and Russia—an address published under the title: "The Message of the 19th Century to the 20th". "*How shall mercantilism (capitalism) be prevented from becoming, by a simple law of history, a curse? In the answer to this question, it seems to me, is the most important message from this century to the next.*"

Has not the whole world, and especially that part of it which has felt itself concerned specifically with education, made the fatal error of identifying education with what takes place in segregated buildings formally dedicated to education—a superstition handed down from the medieval age? Can we not understand that all our "schools" together, from kindergarten to university and beyond, cannot by themselves compass the range of anything worthy to be called "education" if that word is to have any value? This challenging Proces-

sional of Youth is nothing new in America—it has been here for generations. In that processional other millions in preceding years have passed to similar destinations: not merely those men whose memory we gratefully celebrate—some of these like Lincoln never were part of that processional, many, like Edison, only briefly so—but also in that processional have walked men whose memory can only be thought of with shame or execration. For therein traveled not only the inventors, the singers, the creators in many fields, but also the profiteers, the gangsters of all kinds—lawless and legalized—the shyster lawyers, the bribe-taking judges, the editorial prostitutes, whose deeds have made a blistering picture of our civilization. And right now, in possession of our government, dominating our industry and holding the very life of millions in their hands, dumb, stupid, and unconcerned in the face of the most tragic time in the history of this republic, are men who have been part of this same processional of youth to and through the class-rooms of our so-called temples of learning.

The thing we have failed to see or adequately to understand even now is this: that the whole structure and all the processes of human society belong vitally and functionally to anything that deserves the name of education, and that unless industry, government, the press, everything, functions educationally as completely and wholeheartedly as we devoutly wish our schools to do, the process of education becomes as sterile for the ends of character or creative living as a religious organization which centers its chief thought on the program of saving people from a future hell in which no intelligent person any longer believes and getting them into a future heaven which few sober people could possibly desire, becomes futile and useless for meeting the tragic moral and even physical needs of the world in which we live.

We shall agree without argument that human beings are going to become very largely what the stimuli to which in their earlier years they respond, make them. For years the effort has been constant to furnish in these schools, so far as possible only the best stimuli for the growing minds of children. Perhaps the organization of schools thus far as little isolated worlds apart from the flowing current of society is a product of this desire. But in this modern world of newspaper and radio the old idea of isolation or insulation is as out of date for education as the oxcart is for rapid transportation. When the students leave the period of this artificially segregated life, they enter a milieu for which it has not prepared them, a social order with its futile politics, its notoriously corrupt city-governments, its blind leaders, and its farflung enthronement of *wealth-getting at any cost* as the measure of success—and they find a set of stimuli quite different from that which any intelligent educator or any wise parent would approve. The truth is, the school organization and educational theory of to-day are anachronisms, for the most part. Nowhere are they the sincere or deliberate product of even the best knowledge of our own time. They are the product of the thought of a world not remotely resembling the complex, interdependent, machine civilization in which we now—*exist*.

Are these educational forces—the press, business, industry, politics, in a word, the State, by *virtue of what they are*, saying to the boys and girls who leave the schools to face reality, what one of Lincoln Steffens' teachers said to him: "Go to, the world is yours. Nothing is done, nothing is known. The greatest poem isn't written, the best railroad isn't built yet, the perfect state hasn't been thought of. Everything remains to be done—RIGHT, EVERYTHING!" Is that, or anything like it, what the American State is saying to these potential citizens

as they leave school—*are most of them have gained some of the tools of learning, and now face the future?* Is that anything remotely resembling what the State by its whole organization has been saying for a hundred years to that vast multitude of its citizens to whom it has given the elective franchise without ensuring them the possession of a knowledge which alone could give that franchise any real value to its possessors, and left these millions to be the dupes and victims of political harpies and economic sharks? How many Boards of Education will allow a teacher, if they know it, to say such things about this or that "sacred cow": the existing order or things, the antiquated constitution, the courts? Quite otherwise, and for reasons that would not greatly tax the average teacher's mind to understand. Nowhere in the world more than in America is the existing State, to those in authority, the symbol of finality.

Two periods there have been in our history when America was a summons to creative action: the period of the Revolution, and the period of frontier settlement. Let me give but two proofs of the vitality, the potency of those two periods for the flowering of personality, the making of men.

Thomas Paine was born in England, where he lived till 1774. In that year, with a letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin, a shrewd judge of character, he came to America, the America of political struggle and awakening, a challenge to creative thought and action. In England, Paine had been nothing—the dead atmosphere of a stolid aristocracy facing the past could do nothing but smother all that was creative in this man. But, less than two years after reaching America Thomas Paine had written the most compelling document of that whole period—"Common Sense"—forecasting and assuring, *as no other document did*, the Declaration of Independence and the birth of a new republic. America then, at least for a brief time, was *articulately* a summons to creative achievement, and the Thomas Paine of the American Revolution was one of its products. Who will say that the America of 1936 as seen in its political representatives at Washington bears a close resemblance to that of the America of 1776? Why not? Because those who now determine the policies of our government are largely a replica of the British aristocracy of the age of George the Third, and of the entrenched privilege classes of France before its Revolution.

In a log cabin on the frontier in the first decade of the 19th century Abraham Lincoln was born. Frontier life was then

experts like that alien's wife, Mrs. Cowell, and keep it in the hands of the patriots. I sometimes suspect that Moscow is getting in to make ridiculous our form of patriotism with the purpose of undermining from within our culture, our civilization.

IT APPEARS that the patriots of San Francisco and Carmel have had a spy in our midst all this last winter. His alias is Captain Sharkey and he looked his part. San Francisco papers, which exposed him, give his subversive record in the Labor or class-struggle. He came here, knowing what he had to discover and prove for the shipowners of San Francisco and our local vigilantes. They must have told the wrestler what he was after. It was that Moscow gold was sent here to be paid to Harry Bridges for his strikes on the waterfront, which were to start the revolution we are in such need of. That's all he had to find evidence of; that was the plot. He hired houses (yes, plural), put in dictaphones and invited us underminers (and others) to visit him, enjoy his hospitality and talk so that nice, respectable ladies and gentlemen could listen in and hear the evidence taken down by stenographers. It was fun for a while; it proved at least what kind of gentry our patriots were. It proved also that we underminers did not handle any Soviet gold. I asked a prominent patriot to publish the evidence, both what they got and what they failed to get. It might have cleared us. Maybe that is why they wouldn't let it out. All they did, these gentle neighbors of ours, was to stop paying their wrestler and fire him from his job.

I know a national magazine that offers a fair price for an article on Carmel I always have refused to write, lest it hurt our real estate market, but I would like to hint that here, in the news, is stuff for the article they want on "What Kind of a Town is Carmel Anyhow". This shows the kind of people who make this kind of a town. But there are other kinds of people here who would loathe this kind of people. Still such things do happen here. A typical American community, we have our best people, too, we have 100 percenters.

THE EXPOSURE of our police force (note well the word *force*) grows apace. San Francisco, New York and now Sacramento. Even Brisbane is shocked. I am not. I am an American, too; I have found police corruption everywhere I have looked; but I know what Brisbane should know: that this corruption is not only of the police. It is in our politics and it is in ALL our business. It is the very Thing we are rallying to defend in our civilization. The cops learned it as school boys, they have learned it as grown-ups, too, by dealing with business men and employers. Some bold university should summon one of the best (worst) of these silent police crooks to receive a doctor's degree.

THE FRENCH COMMUNISTS are not joining the new French government. That might corrupt them; it would certainly make them stand for corruption. No, they are using their new prestige and power to organize their followers into local soviets and so train them to the revolutionary forms and practices of modern government. In the face of fascism, the French and Spanish Communists go straight ahead. They are learning and, one hopes, teaching. We might set up Soviets in college, so that our students can learn the principles of government without graft or the thoughts of graft, for the police's sake.

THE NEW YORK *Times*, which prints more alien news than most of "us" do, brings this week a picture of the bust

of David Lubin, the Sacramento merchant, which has been set up in Rome, Italy, to the founder of the International Institute of Agriculture on a street renamed for him, the Viale David Lubin.

I WOULD LIKE to have heard Henry Cowell improvising on the piano when he was arrested at his home in Menlo Park. He might have learned his vice in a school I attended near there when I was a boy; I was "snooty" then about the students who were practising the teachings of "boys without girls". I am not so snooty now that I know how our educational system makes such men as my friend Cowell. I repeat: I would like to have heard this beautiful, helpless musician playing for himself while the cops waited to take him off to jail. Music is about the only thing we have got right in this world that is governed by men, not musicians, that were educated as Henry Cowell was.

AGAIN THE SUPREME COURT is serving notice that President Roosevelt's policy of proceeding by evolution to adjust the institutions and machinery of the United States to Change will not be possible. The President is sincere in his purpose, and all men agree that a revolution is to be avoided. Even Reds dread the force and violence that the Conservatives make inevitable. Even the Supreme Court does not visualize the revolutionary alternative. The Conservatives who applaud the Supreme Courts may see the risk of civil war and some of them may want it. But no one consciously prefers a revolution; all men, certainly all Americans hope for and "believe in" evolution, even as the President and his democrats do; the President right now is considering ways to get around the Court and the Constitution.

The function of a progressive weekly is simply to point out amiably that while we all may wish to go the soft way, we—and I mean we, not only the Supreme Court, not only the Business men—we, the American people, are traveling hard, as they say in Asia. Aiming right, we are sailing left.