
Coordinates Through the Void

Elias Canetti: *The Torch in My Ear*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

Andrei Amalrik: *Notes of a Revolutionary*; Alfred A. Knopf; New York.

by Curtis K. Stadtfeld

The tragic failure of public education in contemporary America is the deliberate exclusion of the two elements essential to individual learning and social community. The first is a sense of shock; the second is a body of shared knowledge.

Individual learning takes place for two reasons—natural curiosity and the need to know. The first readily adjusts to environment. A baby needs to know how to get itself fed, cleaned up, and held. An adolescent in an absolutely benign, undemanding environment finds that natural curiosity muted. Without a need to know, and with no demands upon them, young people become the aimless, rootless, purposeless mobs that we see on weekends roaming the shopping malls, seeking fulfillment in the things that glitter in the windows or in some imagined magical encounter. Or worse, they become those mobs roaming the centers of our inner cities, preying on the unwary or bursting into sporadic violence.

A sense of shock—a demand, if you will; some way of forcing a need, of making the individual conscious of the need to know—precedes adult learning. Without that shock or demand, we get precisely what we have for the most part in our public schools and colleges—a restless clutch of young people prepared only to go through the minimum required motions to receive the things they are told are needed to get along in the world: a high school diploma and a

Mr. Stadtfeld is a professor of English and journalism at Eastern Michigan University.

college degree. The fact that those two certificates represent acquisition of knowledge and skills is deemed too traumatic to be mentioned by modern educators. It is uncivil, "uncool" even, to tell teenagers that they must actually do some mental work or they will not be able to function in the world. It is unkind to fail them if they do not work. It is reactionary to insist on universal standards, much less universal language; it is repressive to fit them into any kind of mold. But it is good and decent—and liberal—to hand them along without threat or challenge, to give them a high school diploma and a college degree largely, apparently, on the basis of attendance, because, after all, who are we, the adults who made such a mess of the world, to establish standards, much less insist on them? On, rather, with the greening of America, with the third wave, with the laid-back generation. On too, at the same time, with falling levels of skills and concern, away with obligations and social cohesion, and on with the deterioration of the language to little more than a series of grunts illustrated with gestures and strewn with reassuring catch phrases like "you know?" and "OK."

I once had a black neighbor who had come out of the worst of Harlem to become a nuclear physicist; he was hard at work in the pursuit of an artificial source

of energy through fusion. I asked him what broke him loose from his environment. Two things, he said: a mother who would not tolerate failure, and a personal experience of the kind that precedes all personal learning. His class was taken to a planetarium on a field trip, he recalled, and he sat through the show in total ignorance, not comprehending a single item of the information presented. He was so embarrassed by that exclusion from knowledge that he began to study astronomy, which led him to physics, which led him to a study of the atom and to a search for artificial energy which, if successful, could free us all from one of the limiting physical problems of our time.

Or listen to Canetti, recalling a similar shock of his own: in Vienna, "I stumbled upon paintings of Breughel's . . . 'The Six Blind Men' and 'The Triumph of Death.' Any blind people I subsequently saw came from the first of these paintings. The thought of blindness has haunted me since childhood, when I had been ill with measles and lost my eyesight for a few days. Now, I saw six blind men in a precipitous row, holding one another's sticks or shoulders. The first man, leading the rest, was already in the ditch . . ." And so on, through a wrenching account of the impression that those paintings made on him. Of the shock that led him

In the Mail

Dismay by Eric Maisel; Maya Press; San Francisco, CA. Indeed.

How Philosophy Begins, The Aquinas Lecture, 1983 by Beatrice H. Zedler; Marquette University Press; Milwaukee, WI. As the author points out, "philosophy begins in wonder." This intriguing text is therefore wonderful.

Comedy in Space, Time, and the Imagination by Paul H. Grawe; Nelson-Hall; Chicago, IL. The author attempts to make up for what he calls "twenty-three centuries of mainly misdirected criticism" of comedy in some 360 pages. *That's* comedic.

The Doughface Dilemma or The Invisible Slave in the American Institute's Bicentennial by Harry V. Jaffa; The Claremont Institute; Claremont, CA. Clear evidence that civilized disputations didn't die in the 18th century.

on to other things.

Ironic as it is, much of human progress comes from the ultimate social shock—war. Every war has accelerated scientific discovery, advanced medical knowledge, broadened social awareness of geography. By contrast, as someone once said, the Swiss have had peace and democracy for generations, and out of that era has come their major contribution to civilization—chocolate candy.

The terrible pain that is personal life in the Soviet Union is brought home almost laconically again and again by Amalrik. Returned from Siberian exile, he finds work in an information (propaganda) agency. Relations among workers there seemed:

unconstrained and friendly. But this was only on the surface; fearful of saying too much. These journalists were also actors playing the role of ordinary men and women on one hand, while on another they were 'stalwart, uncompromising workers on the ideological front.' Yet inwardly they were not really like that, so that their lives became a kind of game in which their own personalities were gradually lost. When a person takes up a career (under those conditions), he is still a whole personality and may feel that he is happy. But as the years go by, even though he is outwardly successful and self-confident, he becomes a spiritual wreck—provided, of course, that he has an immortal soul. Many party and KGB officials, on the other hand, seem to have no soul, so that they suffer no torments, either overt or latent.

And so theirs is a society in which only those persons without souls rise to power?

Out of desperation, then, for the individual in the Soviet Union comes learning, and with learning comes frustration and rebellion for some, and in speaking out they go as a result to Siberia. For most, it is simply a retreat into vodka. What will come of those great shocks in the Soviet Union is yet to be seen. But

what will come from a generation of Americans protected by a genial, ineffective educational system from any kind of demand, much less threat or shock, is largely at hand—moral values drawn from prime-time television, social values drawn from the conviviality of being "laid back," and personal values drawn from the windows in those malls.

The second ingredient in education is shared knowledge. A generation ago, nearly everyone read some of the same stories, were forced—the horror of it!—to memorize—greater horror!—certain poems, to read some history, and were directed toward certain conclusions. Were, in short, enculturated. Now, modern educators say that no judgments can be made, that no one should be forced to learn any specific thing, that memorization is no good—like diagramming sentences, it is a source of amusement among progressive educators—and that each teacher and each student should "do his own thing." And speak his own language, go his own way. The result is a society so fragmented, so aimless that it is nearly impossible to establish common points of reference without resorting to popular television. And surely a society that bases its values on such trash is in profound trouble.

Once, in an elementary literature course, I had occasion to inquire of a class if there was anyone who had not heard the tale of Jonah and the Whale. Fully half the class raised hands in ignorance.

If educators should some day discover what they knew two generations ago—that standards are needed, that enforcement of those standards is a healthy thing, and that it is useful to agree on certain information that should be shared by all—then we may find ourselves back on the track of progress. If they continue to dilute the system through misguided kindness and a lack of professional self-confidence, we will continue to have the kind of feckless public-school product that we have today. □



Justice in America

In a recent decision that "the governor's attempt to trim \$9.1 million in state Medicaid reimbursements" was unconstitutional, the Federal and Cook County judiciary provided an update for the old saw, "What goes up must come down." Now what goes up must *not* come down. That there is not enough money in the treasury to provide for all the state's commitments is of no matter to the judges—they are interested only in the purity of the law. The Lord and the legislature giveth, but apparently only the Lord can taketh away.

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Jim Cain, 38-year-old auto-accessories salesman, recently returned to his Seattle home to find it being burglarized by one James Keith, 20, and his teenage girl friend, who were merrily smashing, littering, and despoiling the premises. The outraged Mr. Cain tried to hold Mr. Keith at gunpoint until the police arrived. But when Keith tried to flee, Cain shot and wounded him. Legal trouble naturally followed—for Cain. The burglar has filed suit for unspecified damages because of "great pain and suffering" inflicted by the callous Mr. Cain. Though the county prosecutor's office has cleared Cain of any wrongdoing in the incident, the court nonetheless refuses to dismiss the civil suit, forcing him to spend more than \$4000 in legal fees to defend himself. "How can he sue me? There's got to be something wrong with the system," says a baffled Mr. Cain, while hagiographic books on Earl Warren and his procriminal jurisprudence still pass as scripture in liberal America. □

The Public Purse

Yale Brozen: *Concentration, Mergers, and Public Policy*; Macmillan; New York.

Joel Seligman: *The Transformation of Wall Street: A History of the Securities and Exchange Commission and Modern Corporate Finance*; Houghton Mifflin; Boston.

by Gavin D. Arbuckle

Fifty years ago Berle and Means published *The Modern Corporation*, a work that developed and justified many of the grounds for the public suspicion and fear of large corporations which characterized the years of the Great Depression. George Stigler and Claire Friedland have shown that the central propositions of that book were not supported by the statistical evidence available in the 1930's. In retrospect, it appears that the acceptance of the *The Modern Corporation's* arguments by professional economists, and their use in designing the securities acts of 1933 and 1934, was due more to a shift in intellectual fashion than to the weight of its empirical evidence. In some respects, Yale Brozen's *Concentration, Mergers, and Public Policy* is an attempt to reverse the hostile change in academic attitudes towards large businesses that occurred in the days of Berle and Means. Indeed, while reading Professor Brozen's discussions of economies of scale, rivalry between small numbers of firms, and the technological and innovative efficiencies of large enterprises, one is struck by the fact that none of his arguments would have been unfamiliar to Schumpeter, or even to pre-Depression industrial-organization economists such as Charles Van Hise.

Brozen draws upon a vast number of contemporary research articles to chal-

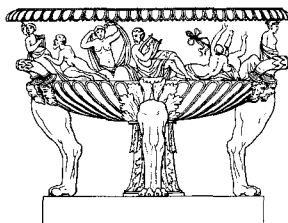
lenge prevailing academic analyses of the economic effects of industrial concentration. Earlier textbooks and articles tended to associate dominance of a market by a small number of large firms with tacit collusion, higher prices, the absence of competition, and overall losses of economic efficiency; Brozen cites evidence demonstrating that large firms with large shares of markets are characterized by lower costs and greater operating efficiencies than smaller firms. He even suggests that persisting large numbers of small firms in a market could, in some circumstances, be taken as an indication of an absence of vigorous competition and of inefficiently high-cost production, while an increased concentration in a market dominated by large, highly profitable firms could signal economic health and productive efficiency. These are, of course, the opposite of the expectations generated by standard industrial-organization analysis.

With regard to public policy, Brozen advocates a shift away from antitrust prosecutions based on inferences of economic inefficiency grounded in studies of market structure. He argues that the government's role should be directed at deterring explicitly anticompetitive conduct such as price-fixing. Since firms grow and gain market shares because of their efficiency rather than by conspiring against potential competitors, Brozen believes that antitrust actions preventing mergers and that forcing large firms to divest themselves of parts of their operations makes no positive contribution to economic welfare. He believes that structural barriers

to entering markets tend to be ineffective in protecting high-cost producers from competition over the long run, so that market forces can be relied on to eliminate inefficient business conduct without government intervention.

Professor Brozen is not alone in taking this approach to industrial concentration. Work along this line has been appearing with increasing regularity in the academic economics journals over the past five years, particularly from University of Chicago researchers. Brozen's book draws much of this work together for the first time. In assessing the reasons for the popularity of Brozen's approach, it is tempting to assert that it is due solely to the force of his arguments. Adjusting doctrine to fit the intellectual fashion of the moment is only what one would expect of an academic indiscipline like psychology or the pseudoscience of sociology, but economists—at least outside the ranks of government consultants—like to think their views are influenced only by empirical evidence.

Professor Brozen's analysis of studies concerning the profits-concentration relationship serves to throw considerable doubt on simplistic theories inferring collusion and insulation from competition from concentrated industrial structure. But to prove that growing firms with large market shares owe their success to their efficiency in reducing costs one must look directly at cost data, and there are very few cost studies in Mr. Brozen's book. There is an excellent reason for this: relatively few cost studies have been done. Cost functions are considerably more difficult to estimate mathematically than the sort of profits-concentration relations investigated in the past. Measuring how technologically innovative and progressive an entity is proves even more difficult. One cannot say that Mr. Brozen has conclusively proven his case. Some of the



Mr. Arbuckle is an economist who writes from Madison, Wisconsin.