

'ENLIGHTENED' EDUCATION

A DISCUSSION OF THE YOUNG CHILD AND CULTURAL PROBLEMS.

IT would be perhaps useful to begin by making a rough classification of educationalists. My reasons for so doing will be apparent later; at present we shall know thereby more clearly whom we are discussing. I generalise, therefore, four 'classes':

a. Those who are *seriously* and intelligently concerned with cultural or psychological problems—a very small minority.

b. The 'enlightened' parents and teachers of the 'New Era' or 'New Ideals Fellowship'—Froebel and Montessori teachers, craftwork experts, etc.

c. Those who accept as right and healthy the conventional education of the prep. schools and public schools. To these class *b* are chiefly anathema; class *a* either ignored or classed with Communism, so-called obscene novels and much else as dangerous and unhealthy.

d. Those to whom education means instruction; not being concerned with moral or cultural problems at all, they do not concern us in this essay.

Class *c*, also, I don't feel it is necessary to discuss in much detail. Their prejudices are often enough and rightly attacked, but they are too obviously a stumbling block to trouble the personal discrimination, if not the eventual existence, of the intelligent. It is rather the subtler danger presented by the 'enlightened' educationalists that I feel to call for present analysis, more particularly in the face of the somewhat careless and complacent approval given to them by admittedly intelligent people.

One number of the *New Era* will give anyone the necessary pass-words of 'enlightened' education. The child is taught to 'express' itself through composition, through handwork, through 'freedom'; to learn by the 'play-way,' by individual work and attention; usually, to absorb by example and otherwise an ideal of collective service. To me, forewarned, it seems that the very humanistic idealism of these 'pass-words' ought to be a danger-signal clear enough to make us suspect, at least:

- (i) That the educationalists who use them have probably very little idea of what they are really doing.
- (ii) Concurrently, that what they think they are doing bears small relation to cultural reality.

That these suspicions are well-founded I fully believe. To substantiate them it is obviously impossible to review *New Era* education in one lump; this must be done gradually. It does not however seem unfair to educators such as Froebel and Decroly to see as a constant background and type the work of Dr. Montessori, who would seem, moreover, the hardest to attack in face of her undoubted ability and the almost fanatical conviction of her followers.

Montessori sets out, in her own words, to produce 'the civilised child.'¹ What this means we shall see. She was intelligent enough to realise that the educator, especially the 'infant' educator, must deal not only with the child's intellect but more constantly with his practical abilities. Her system evolved on practical lines. The children were taught to distinguish, to match, colours, sounds, tactile feelings, scents. They were taught economy (and 'beauty') of movement—how to carry a chair, to strew rose-petals, to wash up, even to scratch gracefully and without unnecessary movement. I am certain that she was right in supposing that most children enjoyed the sense of mastery this gave them, as their play was taken up into the business of being educated.

The didactic apparatus followed. By long practice the children were able to 'feel' and 'see' their letters and their numbers—at their own trained speeds they began to get a mastery over the environment supplied to them by adult life. They began to concentrate on this achievement.

That was enough. Had Montessori been a genius she might have stopped there. But she did not. The moment the children began to concentrate she might have seen that too much of the child's energy was in danger of being absorbed into an artificial world.² She had not told the child to concentrate, but she was

¹From a student's notebook. ²The *utilization* of every atom of (the child's) natural energy' Dr. Theodate L. Smith, *The Montessori System*.

leading it on—giving it just as much as it could manage and no more, till more and more of the child was being taken up into the business. Above all, she was suggesting that the child ought to be busy.

(To say that Montessori leaves a child free from suggestion is nonsense. The whole atmosphere of a Montessori classroom suggests an ideal of 'being busy,' and Dr. Montessori herself is not above direct suggestion of the crudest and most dangerous sort. I know of only one intelligent educationalist who could put the equivalent of *Mi volete bene?* on a school blackboard, and he would do it only to provoke an outburst of 'No's.')

Perhaps, even then, the life outside the classroom might have diluted to a mutual advantage the influence within it, but not so completely as would be possible in a 'Class c' school. There the classroom interests a child so little that he can hardly form his standards from within it. He forgets or reacts. But with the coming of the Montessori, or otherwise 'enlightened' boarding school practically the whole of a child's energy is organised educationally. The handwork specialist comes into her own. The child is set to create. He weaves, plays organised games, makes pots, models the moon (peccavi!), dances, does sums by the Montessori apparatus, above all is 'interested' all the time. It is hard to realise, perhaps, the complete artificiality or the pervasiveness of a world in which everyone is 'interested' or producing something the whole time, unless one works in it. Laying aside its effects on the children, the cultural conception behind it is badly distorted.¹

Psychologically it may be due to sublimation on the part of unmarried women teachers, or to any other cause; culturally, the fact remains: it is the educationalists' conception of culture that is wrong. Without being unduly cynical, we need not be surprised. Culture is becoming more and more the concern of the few—there are too many 'enlightened' schools. The parents or teachers who believe in the artificial educational world of constant creative activity, stimulation, 'intelligent interest,' idealism itself are those who aesthetically contribute to the conceptions of 'beauty' of

¹It would be worth while to investigate the culture of a decade that produced Ford and Montessori. Their likenesses seem to me more essential than their differences.

' style ' ; who appreciate the precious and reminiscent in literature—a fact reflected too often in the handwork, art and music of these schools, which retain all these misconceptions. (This is particularly the fault of P.N.E.U. schools, if one is to judge from their publications.) It does not indeed need much knowledge of actual conditions to substantiate the suspicion that what the educationalist thinks he is doing bears little relation to cultural reality.

What seems to me more important is our first suspicion—that the 'enlightened' educationalists have very little idea of what they are really doing. This may concern the educationalist more directly than the man with critical standards in view, but he cannot afford to neglect it.

I will begin with a concrete, though perhaps particularized example. I was at school at a somewhat conventional prep. school, where boys from 9 - 13 were allowed three afternoons free a week—Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2 - 4.30, Sundays 1.30 - 5. I certainly cannot remember any boy abusing, except trivially, this free-time. They went for walks, played cards or billiards, stuck in stamps, did anything or everything. Where I am now teaching, at an 'advanced' school, we dare not leave the children an hour alone.¹ If we do so, they destroy something, or fight. The children are constantly (not only in their play) restless and listless at the same time, and this with few exceptions (invariably at present children born abroad and caught late into the system). The cause as I see it is two-fold :

(i) They have in reality as much or more against which to react than in a strict school—a constant moral or idealistic suggestion, probably not directly realized.

(ii) They are 'played out' nervously or emotionally; consequently have less nervous power to react. So much energy has been taken up into their work that they are in a highly 'nervous' (i.e. devitalised) condition.

The two may appear contradictory—perhaps I may say that my use of the word 'energy' is suspect. Of course it needs

¹A child in a prep. school is left much more 'alone' than in an advanced school. He may be subject to strict laws, but supervision out of school hours remains mercifully inadequate.

'energy' of a sort to be destructive—a physically exhausted person cannot be violent. I have found it necessary to use the term to denote what I might otherwise call the 'cultural potential,' that is, the nervous and emotional 'fund' of the child. The assumption of the existence of some such basic vitality seems to me necessary. I would refer the reader for a parallel to the philosophy of Lao Tze (*The Secret of the Golden Flower*, trans. Wilhelm, notes by Jung). The point in question is the 'outward flowing' and 'backward flowing' methods: the contention that too much creative action leaves the 'soul' wasted, so that at death it becomes 'kuei,' a daemon or unsubstantial ghost.

I have taken perhaps an extreme example. It happens to be one that concerns me at present. Essentially however I think my case to be fair—that the 'enlightened' education of to-day is producing children brought up in a world of false values, and that in absorbing his energies to this end his teachers are 'expressing' him rather than letting him express himself. The same objection exists in relation to any method carried far enough of 'interesting' a child—teaching by the 'play-way,' etcetera. It arises from a failure to understand amongst much else the meaning of play: above all, to say that the children are expressing themselves in doing four hours a day of handwork (if we count model-making for didactic purposes as handwork) is not true—unless we care to be pedantically honest about 'express.'

It is perhaps worth while, when a conclusion is reached, to reset it in different terms. I do not for a moment pretend that Montessori's work is valueless: I argue it to be insufficient to tackle cultural problems, dangerous because it has arrogated to itself control of a child's cultural and emotional existence. The cultural ideal of the enlightened educationalist is that of the 'escape' poet (*cf.* the world of Morris' *News from Nowhere*); this means a denial not only of the actual world but of the emotions connected with it. (It is something of a shock to realise that an 'enlightened' sex education is often the result of a refusal to recognize the importance or indeed existence of sexual impulses in children.) The cultural problem re-sets itself to the educator as an emotional one. That this is possible should be clear by inference to any reader of D. H. Lawrence, where the emotional problem is seen to be indissoluble from the artistic.

I very much doubt the possibility or the wisdom of a direct cultural education.¹ Despite Montessori, children are not civilized beings. The responsibility for culture lies, as far as educators are concerned, with those who are trying to deal intelligently with the problem of clarifying and organising the emotions.

The majority of so-called psychologists or psycho-analysts must be ruled out. They are wholly uncritical² towards their own conclusions, they deal largely with definite neuroses that need little subtlety in analysis. For most of these Adler, Freud or Jung has prescribed a rule of thumb. It is as easy, it must be remembered, to be derivative in psychology as it is in poetry—and just as ineffectual. That is why I have italicized the word 'serious' in my initial classification—those *seriously* concerned with cultural or psychological problems.

It is not my place here to discuss in detail the work of the two men who seem to me to fulfil in some measure this requirement—Homer Lane and A. S. Neill. Lane dealt largely with delinquent children, and Neill has also dealt with these. Also he writes badly, so that it is difficult for the public to realise the subtlety or the significance of his work. I do not for a moment suggest that Neill's work is in any way a solution of the cultural problem, nor that it is not largely remedial. But it is difficult to see from whom else the education of the next twenty years shall derive if culture is to remain a reality. Certainly, and this is my main theme, it has little chance by way of 'enlightened' methods.

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¹This was being done however with some success, but under exceptionally favourable circumstances, by J. N. Wales at Dartington Hall two or three years ago. The school is now in other hands. ²To trace a neurosis to a single incident is often considered sufficient, whereas it does not need much perspicacity to realise that the exaggerated importance of this incident can only be due to an emotional state already existent.

THE CHINESE RENAISSANCE

THERE are not many parallels to be drawn between China's Renaissance and our own. In one obvious respect the two are sheer opposites: China is not now restoring contact with a past phase of her tradition, she is deliberately breaking away from it. Here, for example, is a description of the attitude taken up towards Confucius, Mencius, and their followers by the creator of the Chinese Revolution, Dr. Sun Yat Sen (died 1925), whose portrait now looks down on every school room or University Auditorium and whose influence still dominates the political ideology of China.

‘He was not in the habit of picking up the doctrine of any great author for discussion. Perhaps their power over him was mainly negative, in affording a ground for his attack on the existing social order, although he showed a great respect for these thinkers of his native land. His work was to overthrow the then existing Government, and he found no support from the philosophers whose views had been adopted to support a regime that he intended to overthrow. To popularise the work of revolution he needed to have an intellectual basis. It is evident that this new intellectual basis of his must go contrariwise to the old. As we know, he was a revolutionist in thought as well as in action.’¹

Two points which appear clearly in this extract must be kept in sight if what is happening is to be understood. The intellectual movement in Modern China is primarily a consequence of the political movement. The traditional Chinese outlook is being remade—not because it was felt to be unsatisfactory in *itself* but because it plainly put China at a disadvantage in

¹*The History of the Kuomintang*, by T. C. Woo.