Review and Reflection

BY

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BIG EDUCATION

IN THE nineteenth century, Big Business rose to prominence. In the twentieth century, Big Labor and Big Government elbowed in. Now a fourth comer has joined the ranks—Big Education. One educational leader has predicted that higher adult education will be the biggest of all enterprises by the year 2000.

Faith in Big Business has waned considerably. Faith in Big Labor is on the wane. Faith in Big Government is still strong, although lots of people are having doubts about it. But faith in Big Education has waxed exceedingly. It is almost universally looked to as the remedy for every kind of problem, and is being promoted at all levels with crusading zeal.

Young people are urged not to drop out of school but to go on to a university education, which is rapidly becoming a requisite not only for a good job but for almost any kind of job. Those who want the better jobs now go in for more study and advanced degrees.

At the other end of the educational scale, an immense international campaign is being mounted to wipe out illiteracy among the masses of the world. Virtually all governments are persuaded that it is of top-priority importance.

Will all this, then, bring about the millenium—or at least keep the world moving forward, as is earnestly urged? Pausing to look at some of the results so far of the education explosion raises some basic questions about our untramelled faith in it.

There are serious riots by university students from Tokyo to Mexico. The May demonstrations in Paris almost amounted to a revolution. Deep unrest persists among college students from New York to California. "Free universities" and "anti-universities,"—challenges hurled at the Establishments—are springing up in Britain, the U.S. and Canada.

Nor is the trouble limited to upper echelons. An educational crisis at the lower levels has split New York City open and revealed profound weaknesses in a system that has been tottering along for twenty years. It is only a matter of time before other cities have similar disorders.

We are being forced to ask searching questions not only about the system but about the whole concept of education. The prolonged teachers' strike and the disturbances and demonstrations are teaching children more than they will ever learn in the classroom about how the modern world is run. The issues and disputes in the school crisis have almost nothing to do with education but are political, social and economic.

Proposed reforms for universities and schools—changes in curriculum, more voice by student, increased local control—seem inadequate in the face of the problem. This touching-up does not question the basic premise on which the whole educational juggernaut has been built up—that is, that it is necessary.

Ironically, the more important education is thought to be, the worse it gets. School crowding, inferior teaching, racial tensions, bureacratic bungling, tax and budget messes—these are some developments at the lower levels. At the university level, "higher" education keeps getting lower. Most of it has become routinized, impersonal and irrelevant. The university is turning into a diploma mill for the Establishment.

When you go looking for a job, no one will ask whether you know the Five Ways of Thomas Aquinas, the Ninety-Five Theses of Martin Luther or the Fourteen Points of Woodrow Wilson—just show the sheepskin. You will then be given a job that I suspect could be performed as well, with a little training by Adam Smith's "dullest fellow who produces the eighteenth part of a pin." You can then forget all your learning —if indeed any of it has remained after pouring it out on examination papers.

All this schooling has not opened up more economic opportunities. It has simply made employers more choosey in looking for a man with a degree. It has just intensified the rat-race. Thus the frantic scramble for more education has a built-in futility. (An unspoken motive for the emphasis on formal education may well be suspected—to keep young people off the labor market for a few more years so as not to aggravate the economic situation.)

Is it any wonder that young persons have become sensitive to the farce (all this and military conscription, too), and have responded with riots, not knowing what else to do?

Education is good. Of course it is! And the university is basically a good idea if it be a place to learn

and discourse and understand, and not merely a trade school. While we are pushing our youngsters through the institutional ritual known as Education, we ought to remember a few lessons ourselves: that the threat of being left behind economically is not an educational problem, but an economic one, and needs to be studied from that point of view; that humanity has survived for millennia without degrees, and, given good economic conditions, has done its best work free of hidebound institutionalism; and that many of our greatest people have been self-educated or educated by their parents.

Little Wolfgang Amadeus learned music from Papa Mozart; Johnny Stuart learned just about everything from Father Mill; and young Robert was turned loose in Daddy Browning's library of six thousand volumes. "Voracious but undisciplined reading," says the college textbook. Good! Otherwise all that poetry might have been disciplined out of him.

Even more than in advanced societies, education from parent to child is standard in primitive societies. In this way the most illiterate of peoples, the Arctic Eskimos and the Australian aborigines, have been able to survive for thousands of years in environments with which civilised man can scarcely cope with all his technology. And we civilised folk, after uprooting these people from their land and grabbing it, think to solve their problems by teaching them to read and write!

"A little learning is a dangerous thing," says the poet. Giving people an education that tantalizes them with the promise of a better life, and withholding the realization of it, is indeed a dangerous thing—both in developed and undeveloped economies. One of the results is the seething unrest the world is now undergoing. More education will only exacerbate the situation—unless we are prepared to follow through with finding the way to full and free economic opportunities for all people. If we can attain that, we need not agonize so much about education—it will take care of itself.

Land Planning and the Property Tax - (2)

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LET US ENUMERATE the ways that land-value taxation supports and presupposes good public planning.

(a) It gives planners a positive tool for influencing private land use where now they have largely powers to say "nay." When they designate an area for development, direct routes and utilities there, and zone it for its new use—up go land taxes, cash-squeezing the land owner into early attention to his new opportunities. Further, since high-use zoning is exploited quickly, there need be no great surplus of it scattered about, as today. It remains tight, and retains its power to shape land use. So also for advantageous locations along the public roads, which incidentally cost much more to produce than zoning, and if produced in surplus because half are unexploited, as today, require the most egregarious waste of public capital.

Some, no doubt, will even regard land-value taxation as a form of tyranny by planners over land owners. But note the limits to the planner's powers. He does not direct a land owner to put his land to a specific use. Nor is there usually just one "highest and best" use of a given site, to which every landowner will be forced. Thriving cities are not characterised by mono-culture and montony, but by variety, constant change, and complementation. Whatever is the highest use in a neighbourhood, say elevator apartments, is supplied in abundance until the need for another one is no greater than the need for some complement like a grocery store or parking structure. Thus an equilibrium generally prevails at any time, which affords each land owner several options. Within limits he may "do his own thing."

So the land tax does not turn the planner into an overcentralised administrator or petty tyrant dictating specifics where he should be delegating authority. Rather, it sets a generalized performance standard, cutting off options beyond a certain degree of slothfulness and disregard for the public cost of giving land its latest value; but leaving wide latitude for individual discretion.

(b) The land-value tax gives public investment great leverage over private investment. Today it is the reverse. Within wide limits, public roads and regulated utilities and the mailman and school bus will follow you wherever you choose to locate. The regional planning commission uses traffic counts to plan bigger roads following the lead of private emigrés.

The land-value tax lets public planners take the initiative if they will. The city extends roads and sewers