

On Education and Equality

J . M . L A L L E Y

Education in a Free Society: Position paper by Benjamin A. Rogge and Pierre Goodrich with related seminar papers by Gottfried Dietz, Russell Kirk, Henry G. Manne, Stephen J. Tonsor, and Dorothy Sayers; edited by Anne Husted Burreigh, *Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1973. 182 pp. \$3.50.*

This Beats Working for a Living: The Dark Secrets of a College Professor, by Professor X, *New Rochelle, N. Y.: Arlington House, 1973. 160 pp. \$5.95.*

I

NEARLY A HALF CENTURY has passed since Abraham Flexner warned us that we must choose between war and civilization. For Dr. Flexner, as for many others then and now, civilization and an educated society were synonymous. But where the nations had proved themselves willing to borrow billions upon billions for the waging of their wars, none had ever gone heavily into debt for the education of its citizens; probably none, he thought, would ever be rich enough to do so.¹ Since that was written, however, Americans have engaged in a Second World War, into the waging of which by land, sea and air over virtually the

whole planet all their enormous resources of treasure, energy and blood were enlisted; they have engaged subsequently in two lesser wars, which, though cruel, costly, and prolonged, were in the end, alas, indecisive. Yet in these same years of warfare, and in despite of Dr. Flexner's reproach, they have within a single generation poured more of their wealth into an effort at mass education than any other people has done in the whole of its history.

It would be gross folly or hypocrisy, though, to pretend that the return from this grandiose expenditure has been an increase of "civilization" in the sense that we have become more orderly and better governed or more affable and urbane in our social relations. It is unlikely ever to be said of the United States in the nineteen forties, 'fifties, 'sixties, and early 'seventies what Talleyrand said of France before 1789, that not to have experienced those days will be never to know the sweetnesses of life. The prevailing winds of doctrine with their promises of universal affluence had encouraged us to anticipate a wholly materialist civilization, to interpret it exclusively in terms of "comfort, opportunity, number, and size"—the very fallacy against which Dr. Flexner himself had warned us. There was also the illusion, widely shared among Americans of recent generations that mass education carried to the very highest academic levels would provide answers to all the problems of democracy. It was conceived as a process of upward leveling, a

progress toward that equality of status and condition that has been defined as humanity's "revolt against chance, fortuitous disparity, unjust power, crystalized privilege."² The removal of these inequities, it was felt, along with the removal of all remaining barriers of ignorance and prejudice, justified the massive intervention, financial and legislative, of the state into academic affairs.

The sociologist Robert Nisbet has noted that among liberal intellectuals in government and journalism as well as in the academy a passion for "redemptive egalitarianism" has become something like a religious imperative, analogous perhaps to spiritual redemption for the Christian.³ These intellectuals view complete social equality not merely as a desideratum but as the supreme good to which all other values must be made subordinate or contributory. Professor Nisbet, who has read a great deal of history and knows what tyrannous uses high-minded and nobly motivated men can make of power when they get it, has premonitions of "a totalitarianism of virtue" and is a bit frightened by them, for he believes that the intellectuals, "who tend to think alike in many ways," have now more power than businessmen or politicians or any other class, and hunger for still more.⁴

II

AMERICANS GENERALLY, though, are now disenchanted with the heavily subsidized experiment in equality through mass education, and many no doubt are prepared to believe with the Messrs. Rogge and Goodrich that one of the main results has been "to make of schools and colleges a collection of nonstudents under the tutelage of nonteachers and the administration of the incompetent." The long and fondly cherished notion that a college diploma would be a certain passport to prosperity has proved a vain delusion, except perhaps in the case of certain athletes. Nor is the possession of an arts degree, or even a doctorate, any longer a recognized certificate of

membership in the world of culture and intellect, since it has been observed that these badges are being conferred on persons barely literate or of ostentatious mediocrity. The anonymous and sardonic "Professor X" tells us that the revulsion began in the mid-1960's, when the taxpaying public became suddenly aware that

taxes for higher education had become astronomical; that state budgets were strained to the limit supporting higher and yet higher salaries for college professors and for their nonsensical research. In fact, the public learned that the colleges and universities were demanding and getting billions of dollars from the federal government in addition to what they were receiving from the states, and this while tuition [cost] was skyrocketing until few poor boys could afford to go to college. This awareness dawned just at a time when students were burning, bombing and rioting—and some professors were visibly exhorting and leading them on. Suddenly, public opinion turned against college and university instructors

III

THE MESSRS. Rogge and Goodrich, who prepared the paper which provided the main basis for discussion at the Liberty Fund seminar would like to have the federal, state, and local governments withdraw from all concern with education, not only with higher education but with primary and secondary education as well. What they propose, in short, is nothing less than the abolition of the public educational system, and with it, implicitly, the repeal or suspension of laws for compulsory schooling. They acknowledge there is little hope that their proposals will be adopted; they present them not as an ideal but as a possible optimum in a free society, which they define as one in which the state will be "limited to the rôle of night watchman," that is to say to the functions of preserving the peace, protecting lives and property, and prevent-

ing or punishing fraud. In such a society—rather close it might seem to the vision of the philosophic anarchists—each individual would be free to do whatever can be done peacefully and without harm to others. Education would become a commodity to be purchased in a competitive market and thus a matter for private enterprise or activity. The adult student would be free to choose the sort of education he wanted to the extent that it was available and that he was capable of assimilating it; parents of course would be free to make the choices for their minor children without regard to legislative or judicial edicts. This would end the problem of religious training and observances now forbidden in public schools by the courts of the secular state, for under a free market, so the authors believe, a much greater variety of choice would be open.

Some [schools] would be operated by religious groups, some would be aggressively secular; some would be specialists in serving the gifted students, some in serving the slower students; some would have a variegated student body, some a homogeneous student body; some would offer only liberal arts, others only the vocationally oriented materials, still others some mixture of the two

As in the marketing of other goods and services, we are told, the costs of education must be borne by the student or by his family or perhaps some patron. It would be better, the authors believe, to have all schools operated for profit, since this would assure that they would be more efficiently conducted and incidentally would relieve sponsoring organizations of some of the grievous burden now borne by the taxpayer. It is clear that the authors are not among those "redemptive egalitarians" who frighten Professor Nisbet. As did Tocqueville much more than a century ago, and as have many others since, they perceive the ultimate incompatibility of liberty and equality, and opt for the former:

Given the infinite variability of the species, there is no way in which all individuals can start as equals, let alone end up as equals. To seek to provide so-called equality of education would literally require the application of constant coercion to the human condition. *The only equality that is consistent with freedom is equality before the law*; in fact, this form of equality is a necessary condition for freedom to exist. All other forms and types of equalities can be brought into being (if at all) only through the use of force. [Authors' italics]

The concept that all must be assured of some form of education, regardless of desire or financial ability, is . . . rejected out of hand. We would also question the practical argument that schooling is necessary to opportunity. We would argue that much of the apparent relationship between schooling and income does not establish causation or reflects state action that required degrees and diplomas as cards of admission to various careers.

The great virtue of the market process, as the Messrs. Rogge and Goodrich see it, is that it soon makes for efficiency by eliminating the inefficient, whereas in publicly subsidized education the effect is opposite. It is no great secret, they say, "that a substantial part of the educational resources of this country are in the hands of the incompetent—yet this is inevitable under the current arrangements." Here the accusation is supported, as far as state universities are concerned, by the testimony of the mysterious Professor X, who is fond of quoting Shaw's apothegm that "he who can does" while "he who cannot teaches," now amended to include: "and he who cannot teach teaches the teachers"—a jibe at the university departments of education, looked upon elsewhere as a kind of academic slum. The professor, however, tends to find his colleagues in all departments, except perhaps the sciences, to be for the most part lazy and in some respects ignorant or

naive. As for the lower strata of the teaching trade,

I can . . . attest . . . that the students most likely to cheat in any given situation are the public school teachers . . . taking courses for the summer. Their level of work almost invariably is low, their attitude defensive, and their caliber wretched. By and large, they are vastly overpaid baby-sitters.

IV

THE MESSRS. Rogge and Goodrich, who, as the reader will have surmised, are much in sympathy with the classical economics, cite Adam Smith's observation that where the pay of the teacher is in the form of salary from an institution rather than fees from his students, the quality of the teaching inevitably suffers.⁵ Here too Professor X is in apparent agreement. An inspired college teacher, he thinks, "would be underpaid at any salary, while a poor one is overpaid no matter what he receives," yet in practice their reward is much the same. "I look around here at this university and see little visible difference between the salaries of twenty-five-year veterans who are unproductive and twenty-five-year veterans who have worked."

Again, it is asserted in the position paper that the market process and a strict application of the laws against fraud would elevate the ethical standards of school and college administrators, particularly in the matter of honest representation. Now prevailing on many campuses, it is said, are conditions that

tend to induce administrators to deceive the students, the parents, the governing boards, the taxpayers and/or the donors. . . . In how many college catalogues do you find prospective students and their parents given *any* information on the social philosophies to which a student is exposed [on the campus in question]? . . . As Professor George Stigler of the University of Chicago has said

". . . the typical university catalogue would never stop Diogenes in his search for an honest man." . . . There are dishonest men and men of questionable integrity in all occupations, but both competition and the law tend to weed them out over a period of time in the market sectors of the economy. However, no such process works as vigorously in the not-for-profit sectors. A thoroughly dishonest man can probably last longer under the umbrella of occupational blessedness in teaching or the ministry than in the world of business.

The principle of tenure and the doctrine of academic freedom are scornfully rejected by the Messrs. Rogge and Goodrich. The first they deem no better than "a shield for incompetents," the second in some cases a refusal of freedom to others. Our authors affirm the right of every man to say freely what he chooses to say, but they deny his right to be paid for saying it by those who do not want to pay him for it through taxes or otherwise. Those who oftenest invoke the sanction of academic freedom are paradoxically the professed egalitarians, yet as a privilege which is limited to particular class it is contrary to the very concept of equality. Academic freedom, agrees Professor X, is "the rallying cry of academic anarchists," and tenure "is the other façade of protection behind which the academic incompetent and the academic anarchist hide."

Tenure means simply that a man cannot be fired except for cause; generally "cause" translates as moral turpitude. Short of playing around with the coeds, a man cannot be fired no matter how wretched he is as a lecturer, or how lazy he is, or how little he publishes. I have observed almost invariably that the first people to raise the cry of academic freedom are those that should be fired first.

And in every case with which I am familiar where the American Association of University Professors (a trade union for liberal, militant and/or incom-

petent professors) has investigated a university and has blacklisted it for violation of tenure or academic freedom, the university has been dead right in firing the individual in question.

In their specifications for a model college in a free society Messrs. Rogge and Goodrich tell us that the income of a teacher ought not to be determined by seniority or by the number of degrees he has accumulated but solely by his effectiveness in serving the purposes of the institution that employs him. This, it seems, could be measured by the number of students attracted to his lectures or seminars or by the knowledge that the students who did attend them might thereby have acquired. If his performance in either respect proves unsatisfactory, he might be denied an increase in pay or simply dropped from the faculty. Here too, then, it is proposed that the usages of private business should prevail.

V

A DOZEN and more persons, many of them academicians themselves, participated in the discussions that followed the presentations of the seminar papers. There was, as Mrs. Burleigh's summary reveals, a good bit of disagreement, though mostly, it seems, on points of definition. What, precisely, is meant by a free society?—by freedom itself?—by education? What are the purposes of education in relation to freedom? Is the proper relation of teacher and student contractual or familial? Should the university be conceived as a kind of intellectual shopping center, or as the Messrs. Dietz and Kirk maintained, as an organic community of scholars devoted to the pursuit of wisdom and truth?—and so, apparently, on and on. To the proposition, however, that education must be completely divorced from the political state there was general though not unanimous assent. The state, it was agreed, necessarily seeks to control education for its own purposes and the extension and consolidation of its powers. Dr. George Roche, president of

Hillsdale College, said that in "the modern majoritarian, egalitarian, politicalized society" the traditional values of education will certainly disappear, whereas under private auspices in a free society there would be good reason to hope for their survival. An unidentified participant thought it would be wrong to let the government provide schools, even in the unlikely event that none should appear in the free market. Professor Manne and some others believed that even indirect subsidies in the form of tax exemptions must be abolished.

Here the dissentients included Dr. Kirk and Professor Dietz. They would prefer private support, but if there were no alternative to state subsidies, would be prepared to accept them. Dr. Kirk's plan—largely inspired by one of Newman's famous lectures of 1873—to replace the multiversity with a model college designed to train the minds and to arouse the moral imagination of the students could hardly be conducted for profit and must depend upon endowments. Professor Dietz envisaged the future mission of the university as one of providing an enclave of freedom in a totalitarian world:

Just as university representatives in the past have not feared the power of popes, kings and popular demagogues, they must not today be afraid of students, faculty, public opinion—or of their powerful organizations. Also, they must not be afraid if being called "illiberal" . . .

But as we approach the final quarter of this turbulent twentieth century the future of the university seems very much in doubt. Its survival, as the professor believes, was grievously threatened in the campus tumults and violences of the previous decade. To prevent the repetition of such a peril he proposes a policy that he calls "reason of university." This would be analogous though not equivalent to the *raison d'état* whereby rulers and politicians have sought to justify the use of unethical, or even illegal, means to an end, if it involved the

preservation of the state. "Reason of university" would permit and even oblige administrators, when need arose, to act peremptorily and decisively without regard to the shibboleths of academic freedom.

An emergency must be met by immediate counteraction. A riot is like a fire: unless put down right away it spreads. The slower the reaction to it, the greater the harm. Berkeley, Columbia, and Cornell are cases in point. So are the Free University of Berlin and other German universities. . . . If abiding by regulations would considerably worsen the situation . . . the executive must exercise the prerogative of his office and act by decree. Sanctions against the violators ought to be severe. Whenever applicable, violators should be punished by criminal law . . .

The universities, says the professor, are engaged in a struggle for their very lives, and the men who are "trusted with running them must pledge their lives to save them."

VI

MUCH MENTION was made throughout the seminar of the imbalance of political attitudes in most university faculties. A consequence of the mass education programs, observed Professor Dietz, has been a loss of excellence and a gain of leftists who "in many instances act under cover of academic freedom in order to destroy that freedom." Professor Tonsor cited a survey taken recently among 60,447 faculty members, of whom more than four fifths identified themselves as "liberal" or "leftist" while those willing to call themselves "strongly conservative" amounted to one tenth of one percent. How, he asks, is intelligent debate on social questions possible where there is "such overwhelming uniformity of political and theoretical social commitment"? This ideological monopolism is one of the reasons for the university's loss of prestige and authority among society at large, and "the very exercise of

proctorship by a self-elected élite in such a situation is vastly corrupting and personally corrosive."

Still this professor is able to envisage the proposed separation of school and state as a vast and necessary step toward reform.

If we are to reintroduce order into the house of intellect we must pass the costs of higher education to the only person who can and should pay the bill. . . . When the student foots the bill many of the present distortions in higher education will disappear. There will, in the first place, be some honesty in cost accounting, and undergraduate tuitions will not be used, as they currently are at many universities, to subsidize an inordinately expensive program of graduate studies. Expensive innovations in instruction will show up immediately in increased tuition costs, and the "research professor" whose chief function is to lend intellectual distinction through his publication record will be a thing of the past. . . .

No one action or program will restore the authority of higher education in America. But unless that authority is restored the university will drift increasingly into the orbit of power politics . . .

VII

THESE TWO BOOKS are portents and for that reason deserve a much wider attention than they are likely to receive. They are both typographically clean, but contain a few small errors of attribution which, though trivial in themselves, one would like to have seen corrected in a work on education. Thus Dr. Kirk credits to G. K. Chesterton a much quoted couplet from *The Shropshire Lad*:⁶

Malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man.

"Professor X" thinks it must have been Aristotle or Plato who first spoke of education as teacher and student sitting at op-

posite ends of a log.⁷ In citing the Orwellian paradox about all being equal but some being more so, he locates it in 1984. Professor Manne, who also cites it, attributes it correctly to *Animal Farm*, but was incautious enough to refer to a former and famous president of Columbia University as *William Murray Butler*!

¹Abraham Flexner, *Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1930).

²Giovanni Sartori, *Democratic Theory* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1962).

³Tape-recorded interview with Robert W. Glasgow, *Psychology Today*, December, 1973.

⁴Nisbet *loc. cit.*

⁵*Wealth of Nations.*

⁶By A. E. Housman.

⁷This conceit is generally credited to President James A. Garfield. He is supposed to have told a gathering of Williams College alumni that his notion of a university was "Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other," an allusion, evidently, to Dr. Hopkins' method of Socratic questioning.