COLLEGE PROLONGS INFANCY

by

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"... the ideals and methods which are dynamic in our institutions of higher learning are false. They are false to the students, false to the social purpose which nourishes them, false to the inward nature of education itself. They are false because they are irrelevant. And they are irrelevant because they are for the most part unabsorbed survivals from a pre-industrial past in an industrial age.

"Though education is customarily described as 'preparation for life', the ways and works of high schools and colleges are so irrelevant to 'life' that their prime achievement remains perforce the prolongation of infancy. They make adulthood harder to reach, not easier."

AN IRONIST reviewing higher education in America since 1920 would find himself struck by three things.

First, perhaps, he would appreciate the gargantuan inflation of pedagogic lore, with its elaborate formalism, its pretensions to precise measurements of mind and character, its blowing up "scientific method" into a meticulous ceremonial with the efficacy of a church ritual. Second, the overgrowth of the educational plant might captivate him: the immense accretion of endowment, the blowsy additions to properties, and the multiplication by millions of teachers and students. Lastly, our ironist might admire a wide and spreading unrest about the effectiveness of the system as an instrument of education. He would take note of much fuss and ferment respecting "progressive education" and "adult education." He would overhear oracles by parents, teachers, and college presidents on why students do anything but study and on how to make them study. He would discern how the prescriptions vary, all the way from Mr. Lowell's house-system at Harvard University to Mr. Meiklejohn's "experimental college" at the University of Wisconsin. As a popular alternative, the suggestion would intrigue him that far more students are enrolled than are "fit" for the higher education, and that this aristocratic privilege should be limited to the "fit" alone; the "fit," of course, being those young people who are shown to be as nearly like their teachers as differences of age, income and interest permit.

"The idea that going to college is one of the inherent rights of man," President Lowell wails, "seems to have obtained a

baseless foothold in the minds of many of our people. To select the fit and devote our energies to them is our duty to the public for whose service we exist." And President Comfort of Haverford bemoans how the diversions which are college life "have cut deep into the serious purpose for which the colleges exist."

Obviously the searching of the heart concerning the values of a college education does not reach to the essentials of the academic tradition. The ancient notions remain ineffable and inviolable. They presume that students exist for the sake of the school, not the school for the sake of the students. Hence the inquiry treats only of who shall be admitted to the sacred fane and by what steps. That in any issue between system and student, the system might be wrong is inconceivable. The pedagogues, like the prohibitionists, find it unbelievable that their engines of grace can be tools of darkness; that they fail, not because those to whom they are applied are intransigently bad, but because their own methods and ideals are intransigently false....

As I see them, the ideals and methods which are dynamic in our institutions of higher learning are false. They are false to the students, false to the social purpose which nourishes them, false to the inward nature of education itself. They are false because they are irrelevant. And they are irrelevant because they are for the most part unabsorbed survivals from a pre-industrial past in an industrial age. But in the eyes of the academicians the failure of the colleges is caused by the deficiencies of the environment, not by their own inherent incapacities. To save themselves, therefore, they reaffirm anew

the invidious ideals of a bygone social economy, and appeal to a persisting snobbism to offset their own growing desuetude. So they complain about the elevation of going to college into an "inherent right" and about the droves of undergraduates whose heedless ways cut deep into "the serious purpose" for which college exists.

II

But if a new “inherent right” has been born into the world, if undergraduate life is in conflict with the “serious purpose” of higher education, the causes thereof are better understood and faced than ignored or belittled. For they are constant causes, and their scope and intensity do not lessen with the days. Though the colleges remain tangent to the realities, they have been far from untouched....

Of these realities, one is the constant, if obstructed, drive toward democracy, based on the dogma of natural rights which animated the wars and works of the founding fathers: free public education is a primary, if abated, attainment of this drive. Another is the correlated growth of population, cities, and natural resources: the dropsical school systems, public and private, are by-products of this increase. In a century the wealth of the United States has multiplied by inconceivable ratios. Even in 1932, at the very trough of a signal deflation, national wealth and income must be stated in figures that have no empirical living meaning. They are merely symbols of indefinitely extending power—manpower and machine-power; and of the organization of this power in dynamic patterns that constitute a social economy.

With this organization, there has come an increase in essential security. In spite of the business-cycle, in spite of unemployment, social waste, and all the rest of the major evils of industrial civilization, its individual citizens are better fed,

better housed, in better health, and have better times than their pre-industrial ancestors. Their average expectation of life has increased from forty-seven years to fifty-eight. The society they compose is physiologically more adult, more aged, than the society of their forbears. More of its members are over forty, fewer of them are under seventeen. During the century of industrialization the proportion of children to adults has decreased by more than a half. This does not mean that the same number of children are born and more die. It means that fewer are born and far fewer die.

Far fewer die because all receive a great deal better care than even the children of the richest used to get a hundred years ago. This care comes only somewhat accidentally and in a disordered way from the parents. It comes systematically from the community. The average parent of the working class deals with his children much as his own parents dealt with him. He in the main realizes that the child requires and somehow receives absorbed attention in extreme infancy. Past that stage, he leaves it more and more to itself. All that he asks of it is to make itself as little troublesome and as largely convenient as possible. For the rest, it is out on the street to grow its way into adulthood for itself, troubled by only occasional irruptions of disciplinary or exploitative parental interest, and by admonitions from the cop on the beat.

To the socially-minded part of the community this is a dangerous situation. They fear disease and crime. They talk about corner gangs; about the break-down of family life. They regard it as of supreme importance “to get the children off the street.” Social settlements, boys’ clubs, scouting, playgrounds,

and other semi-public and public enterprises have come up largely as instruments toward this end. But the chief instrument has become the school.

Since 1900, the school, more than any other social agency, is conceived first as supplementing, then as replacing, the home, and as exercising its function. The school authority is established in a practically complete jurisdiction over the child. Its field expands from indoctrination in the three R's and patriotism to teaching personal hygiene; from teaching personal hygiene to official supervision over the details of health—the care of the teeth, ears and eyes, the adequacy of diet; and finally to keeping an eye on the personal relations of children with their parents themselves. In a word, the school invades the home and takes over more and more of its functions. By its means the control of the child is "socialized."

Now on the face of it, this socialization appears unconnected with the drive and intent of industry as such. It looks rather like a defense against industry. Its animus is humanitarian, not economic; its effect is to delay the functional installation of the child in the economic system. Child labor is quite properly frowned on and hemmed in with rules and restrictions. Schooling is imposed and prolonged to later and later years; where it cannot be made exclusive it is made concurrent with the work-life by means of the continuation schools. And high schools and state universities extend the possibility of schooling as a free public function right up to the voting age and beyond. The immense national wealth makes this possible and easy; it enables the upkeep and expansion of an educational system whose per capita cost is greater than that

of any other country in the world. Whether any connection obtains between these superiorities and the fact that Americans also enjoy a corresponding superiority in juvenile delinquency and crime I cannot say. The paradox is the more interesting because, as schoolmen are likely to boast, the school is often used by the child as a refuge from home and the street, as a place of sanctuary and safety.

Explanation is not easy. On the face of it, the socialization of child-control tends to defeat its own ends. And it tends to defeat its own ends because its instrument is an unnatural environment which offers no field for the assumption and discharge of natural responsibilities such as develop in the circle of an adequate family life. It keeps the young in a state that is tantamount to an artificial prolongation of infancy.

III

Now, in terms of the mechanics of the social economy, infants are parasites upon the body politic. They are sheer consumers, producing nothing; and in the world of nature they absorb the time and attention of adults only until they are ready to produce for themselves what they consume. The more complex the organism, the more highly organized the nervous system and the social life of a species, the longer the period of gestation, and the more prolonged the dependence of the new-born and the young on the parents. A dog will reach adulthood in about a year. A human infant takes from eleven to fifteen years, if we mean by adulthood what constitutes it biologically—namely, sexual maturity. Birds and animals are ready and able to fend for themselves some time before sexual maturity sets in, and data are not lacking in the record that manchildren—like Russia's *bezprizorny* or waifs—also can if need presses. But for all species alike, puberty sets a term. It is the very latest season for the young to leave the parental nest, to live their own lives and build their own nests for themselves. This holds true also for the vast majority of the human young, even under the protection of industrialized society. At puberty they leave school and go to work like their fathers before them, and it is not long until they are entirely on their own, and found families and repeat the cycle again like their fathers. If the practice of society carries their social infancy over into their physiological maturity, it does not do so for very long. In essentials they enter into the heritage, such as it is, of

adulthood, while custom compels the young of the privileged residual population to remain in personal and social swaddling clothes.

This compulsion is usually identified with “having advantages.” It is exercised upon the young of the rich and protected, not of the poor and unprotected. But because the notion prevails that education is the chief if not the sole instrument of democracy, and that every man, if he has a chance, can be as good as his betters and is entitled to the same rights and privileges, the number whom the compulsion reaches has increased, since the beginning of the century, well-nigh geometrically. Thus, between 1900 and 1930 the high school population has multiplied ten-fold; the total number of pupils today is between five and six million. And more than a million young men and women are enrolled in the colleges and universities. High school and college are considered “advantages,” and the essence of the advantage is a social infantilism imposed upon a biological maturity.

IV

Though education is customarily described as “preparation for life,” the ways and works of high schools and colleges are so irrelevant to “life” that their prime achievement remains perforce the prolongation of infancy. They make adulthood harder to reach, not easier.

What, socially, adulthood consists in, varies a good deal from civilization to civilization and from age to age. But everywhere, and at all times, it is grounded upon sexual maturity and maintained on personal responsibility for winning food, clothing, and shelter, and defending one’s self against enemies and disease. Among primitive people, adulthood is initiated by puberty and established and confirmed by means of certain cruel and terrifying rites through which boys and girls are inducted into the society of men and women. Of these rites there survives among us today only that form of sadism and *schadenfreude* known as hazing, practiced by upperclassmen on newcomers and by fraternity brothers on neophytes. In the school tradition these cruelties are meaningless, but in the rites of the primitive they compose a part, perhaps a major part, of all the formal direct “education” the young savage ever gets. They impose bitter fear and exquisite pain which the elders require shall be unflinchingly endured. During three weeks, more or less, primitives torture their young. When they have finished, the young are utterly initiate, finally and completely adults, fully responsible members of their communities.

Classical antiquity prolonged and rationalized this initiatory period. Pain and endurance were imposed less directly but, in one way or another, they were exacted. The boys of Sparta were segregated from their women folk in their seventh year and made charges of the state. From their twelfth year to their eighteenth, they were in the constant company of their elders, often their elders' favorite company. They collaborated in purveying food, in hunting and in worship. In what time remained, they prepared to practise war, the primary vocation of the citizen. At eighteen, war became their exclusive concern. In Athens, as in Sparta, formal schooling began at the age of seven and ended with puberty at about sixteen. Then the boy was presented at the Agora. He associated freely with his contemporaries and elders, he trained at the gymnasium, attended the law courts and the theatre. He was an *ephebus*, and after two years he took the oath of the *ephebus* and his name was written on the list of free citizens. He had thereby left the jurisdiction of his parents for the jurisdiction of the state. In Rome, a boy entered upon the responsibility of manhood when he doffed the *toga praetexta* and put on manhood's dress. This was during puberty, at about the age of fifteen. Before then he had learned at home and in the Forum the arts of war and the law of the Twelve Tables. After Roman life became Hellenized, schools acquired a vogue; but unless a boy was destined for public life, schooling ended at puberty. Otherwise, a boy entered the Rhetoric School and trained for his vocation. Among the Jews, a boy assumed adult responsibility (he still does so, though it is now merely religious) upon entering adolescence. He was then *Bar Mitzvah*. He, and not his father, had become responsible for his fulfilling

the law and the commandments. He underwent a short, formal, preliminary training, and on the Sabbath following his birthday his father took him to the synagogue and formally renounced responsibility for his son's life and works.

So, among the primitives and the ancients, physiological maturity was the occasion for signalizing and establishing social responsibility, of entering into adulthood. This is still the case among the churches. Ecclesiastical citizenship is reached at puberty. Puberty is the time when Catholic boys and girls are initiated by the priests into the mystery of salvation and are endowed with the responsibilities of the adult members of the religious community. They undergo confirmation. Puberty is the time arranged for the young of the evangelical sects to be convicted of sin, to enter into grace, and to join the church. Puberty is the time when secularized Jews celebrate *Bar Mitzvah* as a merely religious event. In the definition of adulthood, the churches are at one with the ancients.

Almost equally so are the military establishments of states. Military duty comes at a much earlier age than civil responsibility. Modern industrial nations continue to conscript their young at from sixteen to eighteen. Also, the taxing power defines the young as self-supporting members of the economic order at eighteen; at that age exemption on their account ceases. For tax gatherers and armies, as for religious sects, adulthood and sexual readiness lie close together.

And this readiness is recognized in women by custom and law, which set the "age of consent" at puberty and raise it nowhere beyond sixteen. Moreover the readiness finds its purpose more largely than we imagine in marriage. The United States census

of 1920 shows that nearly a quarter of all young people from fifteen to twenty-four were married, and the proportion has not grown less since then. Nor are these marriages confined to the poor. The rich signalize their daughters' readiness by "presenting them to society" at from sixteen to eighteen; and there is much rivalry among "debs" about getting married or at least engaged during their first year "out." The men of this class, on the other hand, tend to marry much later, while the average age of marriage for the "college bred" of both sexes is unnaturally higher. The whole contrasts sharply with the early marriage age of a hundred years ago.

V

Personal distinction also seems to go with the assumption of adulthood soon after puberty. Whether this is attained through some special attitude or general ability enchannelled by custom, opportunity, or accident in a particular vocation, makes little difference. Poets, painters, mathematicians, scientists, engineers, traders of distinction, assume the professional attitude and the responsibility of adulthood at an early age. Shelley, Keats, Bryant, Peter Cooper, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, George Eliot, Thomas Edison, Maxwell, Galileo, and countless others of the great, all began young. Nelson went to sea at twelve and commanded a ship at fifteen. His contemporary captains in the American merchant marine were boys of eighteen and nineteen. Much of the work of the world continues to be done by men and women under twenty-five. Prizefighters are old at thirty. It is a favorite doctrine of representative American employers, such as Henry Ford, that workingmen over forty are antiquated, and to be scrapped. Did not the great Osler advise euthanasia for all men over sixty? Nevertheless, the ruling personages in the ruling classes—the captains of industry, the masters of finance, the public officials, the judges, the generals—are progressively older and older now. They are men whose minds had matured and set while their bodies were young, and whose policies derive from the unconscious premise that what was modern and advanced in their youth is necessarily so in their old age.