ELITISM IN EDUCATION AND THE RADICAL INITIATIVE

HELEN G. PALMER

There is no necessary connection between socialism and pessimism.
John P. White

The child of poorest parents', said W.J. Stephen, Victorian Attorney General in 1872, 'who is sent without payment to be educated by a master appointed by the State does not receive his education in the way in which a child received education at a charity school in England; but he gets it as one of the advantages derived from living in a free country where all co-operate in supplying the common necessities.'

Amid the rhetoric with which during the nineteenth century the capitalist countries launched their national systems of education, there were few who put the primary aim of public education more directly than this liberal. Industrial capitalism needed a literate, numerate, working population if management functions were to be put into operation, if instructions were to be followed and skills acquired by its operatives; and with its rise, universal basic education became essential. This was brought about by the only means possible, the creation of national systems of public schools, which quickly swept out of existence the patchwork of small private schools, leaving the larger, more powerful ones to consolidate and concentrate on their special function of training a governing elite. The Australian colonies reached this point in the 1860s and 1870s, when the states passed Acts establishing national systems of public elementary education. The fact that much of the debate appeared to be about the role of denominational education should not obscure the point that what was really at issue was the need of industry and commerce for a literate and numerate population.

There is however a second voice always to be heard—a voice of warning. The national systems are to provide for the ruled, not the rulers. This division had been made earlier. While the squattocracy sent their sons to England to be educated as gentlemen and masters, Macquarie,

in 1810, was instructing the Sydney Charity Schools to make their pupils 'dutiful and obedient to their Parents and Superiors, honest, faithful and useful members of Society, and good Christians'. Good operatives had to be able to read, write and figure, but give too much of it and where would we get our hewers of wood and drawers of water? What was envisaged by the fathers of the Education Acts was similarly limited. On the one hand, national education was necessary to prevent the spread of discontent and radical ideas among the masses. It was true that if you taught the masses to read they might read Tom Payne, but they were more likely to be domesticated. On the other hand, education was to be thought of, as even a campaigner for the 8-hour day and the early trade unions, J.J. Cauty, said in debate, as a measure that fell within the realm of the state only in relation to 'those children whose education their parents are unable or unwilling to undertake; and those children ought only to be taught the rudiments of primary education'.

For the ruled, the three Rs were enough. But not forever. The third question, late in being posed, concerned the nature of the educational meal provided. Both its quantity and its quality were involved. There was a tendency on the part of the labour movement to ignore this question, as though education were merely another form of welfare service, uncoloured by class values. Those in the movement who were concerned did not attribute class content to education, but limited themselves in the main to criticism of its jingoism and to cultivation of Australian national sentiment. Thus the Victorian A.L.P. Conference of 1929 included two clauses in its programme:

That peace and internationalism be inculcated in the minds of all children attending state schools.

That no articles relating to or extolling wars, battles, or heroes of past wars be printed in state school papers and books.

In 1905, the Federal Labor Party Conference adopted in its platform the aim of the cultivation of an Australian sentiment based upon the maintenance of racial purity and the development in Australia of an enlightened and self-reliant community. The 'racial purity' phrase referred, of course, to the determination of the party to prevent the 'dilution of cheap labour', but the effect of the whole statement was to make clear the labour movement's independence of cultural as well as economic and political ties with the older countries, notably Great Britain. There was, however, no notion that education itself was a function of the establishment. It is not difficult to find parallels to these concerns in the last quarter of the twentieth century. For instance:

Mr C. E. Brain, the managing director of Australia's biggest employment agency, said this week that job opportunities were very limited for people who could not read or write. They might become factory workers, but they could not become supervisors; they might become labourers, but, without the ability to read and write reports and other relevant material, they would not be appointed foremen. They are condemned to the lower
however, the balance becomes precarious. The kinds of skills demanded by the economy must be redefined, and with them the social relationships and attitudes needed to support the new patterns. Yet this quickly brings under challenge the question of control, for if more is to be required of the ruled, they may become unwilling to leave all the definitions of roles to the rulers. The existence of two forms of education is no longer taken for granted as part of the immutable order of things: the old upstairs-downstairs justifications are no longer universally accepted. As new grounds are constantly sought to justify the retention of power by an elite, so must new ways of guaranteeing their educational advantage be found. But it ceases to be possible to ensure this by educating rulers and ruled entirely separately, as an administrative act. For the concept of an educational elite to be separated from class, it must be justified on educational rather than political grounds. This justification must permeate the whole school system and be propounded by educators rather than rulers. More than that, it must be such as to be credible to and believed by the ruled. It is with this process that radicals must be concerned.

III

Any class society produces a class education. Australia grew up when money had replaced social rank as a measure of the elite. The twentieth century saw the rise of higher demands for education. Basic literacy and the three Rs were no longer sufficient for the operatives. With more sophisticated form of production, universal elementary education proved inadequate. In the first decades of the century, primary schools added 'primary tops' or became higher elementary schools. The first high schools were established. The bar-line had been raised a notch. Which pupils were to rise above it? The labour movement was insistent that the barrier should not be a financial one; that the public schools should be the base for a system of 'free education, from the primary school to the university'. But there was still need for selection for scarce secondary places among those pupils whose parents could afford to let them stay at school for post-primary education; and this was in the main done by competition for bursaries or scholarships.

Methods of selection for secondary education, and then for the various 'sides' within secondary education—general, technical, commercial and home science—became the concern of educational administrators between the two World Wars. From this flowed an interest in improving methods of selection. And if selection, why not prediction? If pupils could be directed into courses for which they were best suited, much wastage could be avoided. It is from this point that educational psychology, and in particular psychometrics, established itself as a key part of educational administration and ideology. Hence it is relevant to examine the English experience, from which so much of the thinking in Australia derived.

Concern that Britain was falling behind in the race for industrial development, and a rising dissatisfaction with an educational structure that was proving inadequate even for its limited aims, led in the twenties and thirties to demand for the replacement of the hierarchical ladder by 'secondary education for all'—the title of an important statement by R. H. Tawney. The Hadow Report of 1926 made some attempt to shift policy towards making secondary education a stage in its own right for all children, not merely an afterthought at the top of the elementary school; and it foreshadowed the raising of the school leaving age to fifteen. The Report was soon under frontal attack. To provide a framework of secondary education for all adolescents would mean lowering the quality of existing secondary schools—'sacrificing' the 'academic 30 per cent' to 'the great majority of the child population [who] must leave school to take up wage earning occupations...'. However, as the wider ambitions of the Report were whittled away by the economies of the late twenties and the depression years, it became clear that it had already sold the pass by confining its formulations too closely within the educational assumptions of the existing hierarchical order. During the thirties it was this emphasis on the differing 'needs' of children that enabled the opponents of secondary education for all to open the flood gates to an era of elitism with a new theoretical base.

The history of the rise of the cult of 'intelligence testing' has been amply documented. It is perhaps sufficient here to quote the foreshadowing in which it appeared as the theoretical underpinning of the Spen Report of 1938, which set the pattern for English education for decades to follow:

Intellectual development during childhood appears to progress as if it were governed by a single central factor, usually known as 'general intelligence', which may broadly be described as innate all-round intellectual ability. It appears to enter into everything which the child attempts to think, to say, or do, and seems on the whole to be the most important factor in determining his work in the classroom.

The Board, adds the Report, had been assured by its 'psychological witnesses' that this factor of general intelligence could be approximately measured by intelligence tests, and hence that it was possible at a very early age 'to predict with some degree of accuracy the ultimate level of a child's intellectual powers'. It is from this that 'Different children from the age of eleven, if justice is to be done to their varying capacities, require types of education varying in certain important respects'. The definition of 'types of abilities' became, in the Norwood Report of 1939, different 'types of mind'. These were basically three: the pupil who 'is interested in learning for its own sake, who can grasp an argument or follow a piece of connected reasoning'; second, the pupil 'whose interests lie markedly in the field of applied science or applied art'; and third, the pupil 'who deals more easily with concrete things than with ideas... abstractions mean little to him... His horizon is near, and within a
was left was merely a device for selecting the few most likely to fit into
the English grammar school.

IV

If dependence on IQ theory was never as complete in Australia as in
England, the assumptions upon which it rests remain as pervasive as
ever. While it is no longer acceptable to make selection for various
forms of secondary school, or various 'streams' within the secondary
school, dependent upon the IQ alone, the IQ mixed in various formulae
with tests of performance—for example, in the form of the 'composite
mark' in NSW—travels with the pupil through his school career in some
states. Such a mark is frequently consulted at the end of the pupil's
schooling when examination marks in various subjects are 'weighted'
as part of the procedure for tertiary selection. The Karmel Commission
worked on the assumption that disadvantaged children are to be found
in disadvantaged areas—'Australia's most underprivileged neighbour-
hoods'—and found 1023 schools with about 13 per cent of the country's
pupils in that category.

The Karmel Report has aroused the special ire of the elitists because
of its concern for educational 'outcomes', not merely equality of educa-
tional opportunity. Equality of opportunity, offered to competitors who
have unequal status, merely perpetuates inequalities that already exist.
For the elitist, however, equality of outcomes is a heresy, as James
McAuley, a leading spokesman for the intellectual Right, said in an
address to the New South Wales Liberal Party soon after the publication
of the Karmel Report.18

In pursuance of its egalitarian 'philosophy' the Schools Commission
proclaims an emphasis on more equal outcomes from schooling'. Not
more equal opportunities merely, but more equal outcomes. Schools
are inhabited by middle and upper-level students with ability and drive
and by low-level students with poor aptitudes and motivation. If you
give equal opportunities to the able students to realise their potential on
high-culture material suited to their needs, it is pretty certain that the
gap will widen between what they achieve and what the unwilling
student will achieve. The only way in practice to produce 'more equal outcomes'
is to flatten down the top. . [The more able] are entitled to matriculate
into the high culture and not be held down to populist mediocrity.

In reply, Dr K. R. McKinnon, Chairman of the Schools Commission,
denied that giving extra assistance to disadvantaged children would
result in 'conformity or levelling down'.

Of course, this will result in diversity of individual achievement, but not,
one hopes, differences between boys and girls, rich and poor, town and
country, migrants and native-born, or black and white.19

There are other Australian critics who challenge more directly the
elitists 'high culture' approach. For example, the views of Stephen

Knight, Associate Professor of English at Sydney University, are re-
ported as follows:

Professor Knight, on the other hand, argues that 'high' culture may have
little relevance to today's students. The principle behind the 'high' culture,
as defined by Matthew Arnold and propagated by Dr F. R. Leavis, is
that there is a type of approach which trains you for life, he said. 'Nobody
denies that fine literature and fine music is a grand thing. But is this the
only type of culture? And is it necessarily the type of culture which should
be forced on students?' He said he was in agreement with the Schools
Commission that culture is 'more broadly based'.20

The charge that education is middle class and that it teaches working-
class children to despise and reject their own culture hangs heavily on
arguments about language. Bernstein21 described the language of the
working class (though there is much argument about the term) as being
of a 'restricted' character, in the sense that it could not reach out to
certain kinds of meanings, and limited the power of the speakers to
understand their environment. It was 'context-bound', not suited to
universal or generalised statement, and restricted working-class children
educationally. Standard speech, more the currency of the middle class
certainly and the language of education, was capable of 'context free'
use and operated an 'elaborated' as opposed to a restricted code. Ber-
stein's views, his critics claim, are based on insufficent study of the actual
speech of children. In particular, Labov,22 in analysing the speech of
Negro children in America, points to its richness and immediacy and
suggests that standard English as used by the middle class is 'middle
class verbosity'. 'We know that people who use these stylistic devices
are educated people, and we are inclined to credit them with saying
something intelligent.' Rose23 attacks Bernstein's work as a dogma
that has had a dangerous effect on the education of working-class children:
'Whereas in the fifties (they) had their IQs branded on their forehead,
in the sixties more and more of them had the brand changed to "restricted"
or "elaborated".' He sums up:

In all that I have said I may possibly have given the impression that I
believe that working-class speech is as fine an instrument as could be
devised for communication and thinking, and that middle-class speech
is pretentious, stilted. That would be absurd romanticism. I am saying
that the relationship between class and speech cannot be described or
understood by the usual sociological methods. Working-class speech
has its own strength which the normal linguistic terminology has not been
able to catch. There is no sharp dividing line between it and any other
kind of speech, but infinite variations in the deployment of the resources
of language. I do not think there are aspects of language usually acquired
through education which, given favourable circumstances, give access to
to more powerful ways of thinking; but given the conditions of life of
many strata of the middle class, the language acquired through education
can never deserts of ignorance. Moreover, the middle class have often
to pay the price for the acquisition of certain kinds of transactional}
by the visit in 1937, organised by an English body called the New Education Fellowship (NEF), of a group of speakers from ten countries. Progressive education, pioneered by people like Montessori and Hornor Lane, had taken form in England as a reaction to the rigours and patriotic direction of education during World War I. On the individual level, progressives tended to follow philosophies such as that enunciated by Hornor Lane:

> Human nature is innately good; the unconscious processes are in no way immoral. Faults are not corrected by, but brought about by, suppression in childhood... The freer a child is, the more it will be considered and social, and more its chief interests will be progressive and the more its fundamental instinct, always to find new difficulties to conquer, will have valuable outlets. It is the attempt to create a conscience in children which leads in adults to unconscious conflict and neurotic inefficiency. A conscience cannot be imposed.24

The pioneer progressives saw the child in terms of a metaphor: people have not realized that development can only come from within and cannot come from without. The living plant must develop its own cells; the most skilful gardener is incapable of producing in the plant even the most imperfect and rudimentary growth of cells. The best he can do is to provide conditions which will favour development — nourishment, air, space.25

Specifically, as Montessori told an NEF conference in 1929, the essential thing was not to think of how to teach the child, or how to influence him for his own intellectual good, but of how to construct about him an environment adapted to his development, and then to leave him to develop freely. At this fundamental level, the progressives accepted a view that was consistent with belief in the innate capacities of the child. They were in fact not much concerned with his intellectual development, or with the relatively advantageous position of the children of the working class (in the main school systems) — an ignored assimilation of fact that most of their models were small private schools outside the mainstream. Some, it is true, recognized rather curiously the need for what Dr Harold Rugg called the 'social heritage' factor in training — 'that part of the social heritage that must definitely be accepted by all, e.g. the multiplication table, the principles of mechanics, the decencies of life'. But in general their insistence that growth must come 'from within the child himself', with the function of the educator being that of providing 'an environment perfectly adapted to his life' (Montessori), assumed that all the elements of growth were within the child at birth, and that the process of unfolding from within would, given the absence of constraints, take place automatically. This placed them in an idealist position.

The NEF visit provided a rare outside view of Australian education and found it over-centralised and under-funded. (Professor F. Hart, visiting the school at Kelgoorie, found it 'the world's poorest school in the world's richest mile'.) The publication in Australia of the report of the 1937 NEF conference, 'Education for Complete Living', and further visits by speaking teams in 1946 and 1949, gave an impetus to progressive thinking in the state systems. The progressives believed in the value of composite subjects, such as social studies rather than history and geography, child-centred schools rather than teacher dominated ones, co-operation rather than competition, and internationalism rather than nationalism.26

For practical purposes, this reinforced the elitist position that children have innate capacities that provide a limit to their intellectual growth. The progressives with their emphasis on child-centred schools and the many-sided development of the child tended to give support to the 'types of children' theory. A favourite example of the project approach current during the thirties and forties was that of a social studies project. The class was following an air race from London to Sydney, and each day noted the progress of the aviators and the countries over which they were flying. The pupils shared the work, each contributing his part. Pupil A was good at research; his role was to read about the countries covered in the encyclopedia and report to the class. Pupil Z was good at handwriting; his role was to cut out and place in position the flags for each team of aviators. The point of the example was to demonstrate that there should be parities of esteem between the contributions made by the two children, since each was contributing according to his ability. Such instances, implicit in the project approach, are an example of the essentially idealist position of progressive education. Moreover

Many of the progressive ideas are a form of paternalist social control, developed precisely out of the selective ethos as realised in colleges of education — i.e. embodying the Black Paper assumption that working-class children must be entertained or kept busy rather than taught, because they are incapable of intellectual achievement. This element in progressivism is in deed an impediment to developing the qualities of citizenship that are necessitated as a common bond by the present predicament of society: a broad knowledge of the state of the world and how it got to be so; an understanding of the limitations and provisional nature of any view of the world, i.e. an understanding of the forms of knowledge; the skills and confidence to be active in public affairs; environmental awareness and technological inventiveness; an understanding of the means of communication to which we are all subject: an imaginative interest in unfamiliar cultures; and so on.27

Public education today comes under criticism from a new direction. The elements of this criticism have been building up for a long time; but it has emerged as a coherent theory only in the last ten or fifteen years. The j-n-words are an index of the period: escalation, pollution, rat race, racism, ZPG, multiversity, establishment. And the words marking the response: drop-out, student revolt, black power. It is no accident that many of the groups whose publications flood the bookshelves draw their insights or their experience from the Third World — that source of much
of alternative to lock-step schooling. We do need to break the monopoly that schooling has over the process of learning, because it is a monopoly that excludes. But the young radical who votes against the system with his feet—who, like Stork, is ready at any moment to get hold of a bike and a few beads and set off for the Ganges—comes from a social group that has the initial advantages. He has had his educational ‘good start’; with that under his belt, he can opt out, and, at any time he chooses, opt in again. The affluent society offers this freedom only to a few. For the majority of Australian children, all choices are not open. Their environments is not rich in any values that can be of use to children. It is merely glossy. The reverse side of glossy is shoddy—and children are a prime target for exploitation in the consumer society. Their environment does not open windows to stimulating experiences or beckon them forward with an invitation to explore a wider world. They must find their sense of their own worth, their place in the scheme of things, their satisfactions and their budding interests where they are, or not at all. And for better or worse, they are in the schools.

Apart from a ritual gesture towards the needs of ‘children with special learning difficulties’, the manifesto for the Australian Council for Educational Standards, another attack on the Australian public schools, reads as if the only children in the educational system were in its ‘A’ stream, destined for the tertiary level. The statement is open to criticism not so much because it is a prescription for non-change, or because it warns against the spread of ‘an anti-intellectual approach in the name of “progressive education”’ (a genuine criticism, as indicated earlier in this essay), or because it could be written about a man’s land independent of time or space so completely does it disregard the special problems of our time. It is open to criticism because it is so patently concerned with an elite reproducing itself. It provides, as it were, a closed room, with the great majority of children with their concerns and problems left outside.

VI

Several years ago Doug White identified three models of curriculum that could be abstracted from Australian education:

1. The first is that of top-down instructions, prescribed course of study and textbooks, external examinations, fully-occupied student time, rigid rules of conduct for teachers and students, inspection and checking from above. In this kind of system, students learn that it is necessary to abide by the rules, that coercion is a fact of life and that knowledge is something objective and in the possession of the authorities. This is the kind of school education which is everywhere passing away, though not without its death agonies, as the frequent battles in high schools over such issues as hair length and uniforms indicate. The kind of theory and research which accords with this makes assumptions, for example, about fixed abilities and is concerned with the best methods of getting knowledge across.

2. A second model can be built around the idea of the professional teacher,
about social change.

It is to questions such as these that radicals must now address themselves.

NOTES

3. In this essay, the term 'public' is used to describe government-provided schools. Although it has its roots in elitism, the system of Public Schools—that is non-government schools—is not what he has in mind.
7. Wyn Williams, in Democracy and Education (NSYE).
8. For instance, J.M. Australia P/L, which supplies a large proportion of the electronic hardware to Australian schools, grew from the Minnecarpa Mining and Manufacturing (Aust.) P/L Ltd. and has invested largely with American hands.
10. A thorough multi-media kit—strip films, tapes and a brochure—put out by the Encyclopaedia Britannica, South East Asia contains a segment on China. It contains the dismissive phrase, "Although the Comor Keeps Forward it ...
12. However, care must be taken to see that the secondary stage is "sufficiently elastic", and contains schools of sufficient variety of type, to meet the needs of all students... Thus all go forward, through along different paths. Selection by differentiaction takes the place of selection by elimination."
13. In this section the author is indebted to the work of Professor Brian Sloman in particular, Intelligence, Psychology, and Education—a Marxist Critique (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1977) and The Politics of Educational Reform, 1970-1971 (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1974).
18. From a report in University of Sydney News.
22. Hunter Lane, Toms, Pajins, and Teachers.
26. Here, I have drawn upon Helen Palmer, "Education is good, so more education is better", Australia (Autumn 1974).
28. Brian Smith, "Introduction to Artificial Intelligence, Psychology and Education" (Lawrence and Wishart, 1975).

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