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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

General Education Today

by
Jerry G. Gaff

Jossey-Bass, Publishers,
1983
San Francisco

Jerry G. Gaff's *General Education Today* is a notable contribution to the recent literature on general education reform, for it addresses the issue of the changing client population in American post-secondary education and offers practical suggestions for general education revision. A former director of curriculum development at the Association of American Colleges, Gaff supports his ideas with data from two national research projects. While he does not offer a particular blueprint for general education reform, his comprehensive approach to the subject and his numerous illustrations make this book very useful for anyone engaged in the revision process. Indeed, this sensible and well-organized study might be read with profit by every teacher and administrator in higher education.

Gaff defines the general education curriculum as a social contract in which the multiple interests of an institution agree upon the meaning of a "proper education." As New Fist, the prehistoric curriculum specialist in *The Sabertooth Curriculum*, would agree, changing times require a periodic re-examination of the meaning of a "proper education." Like New Fist, Gaff places the present reform movement in historical perspective.

The last sustained national effort on behalf of general education was in the late 1940s and early 1950s. During this period the Harvard "Redbook," *General Education in a Free Society*, 1945, had a tremendous influence, especially on private higher education. In the post-Sputnik years of the late 1950s, however, general education began to receive less emphasis when federal funds made research and specialization more attractive than teaching basic courses. The upheavals of the 1960s dealt further blows to the concept of general

education. Traditional liberal arts such as history and literature did not seem relevant to the contemporary scene and, according to Gaff, the student rebellions were aimed in part at "irrelevant courses taught by poorly prepared teaching assistants or low-status instructors." What had become traditional general education was further challenged in the 1970s by the expansion of career training and changes in student population.

"The ideal of generally educated" students did not die, however, and by the late 1970s there were signs of a revival. This reform continues and must take into account several new conditions. As higher education becomes more public and differentiated, a single model of general education, such as the Harvard plan of 1945, will not suffice. Also, the perspective of Western Civilization, so dominant in past curriculums, must give way, according to Gaff, to a global outlook. Finally, the changing curricular patterns must reflect the greater diversity of students in higher education today.

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Advocating what he calls an institutional approach, Gaff envisions each campus shaping its own revision through extensive internal dialogue rather than relying on the recommendations of prestigious individuals or commissions. It is a herculean task to achieve a consensus on the goals of general education and still create a curriculum representative of the various purposes, concepts, and interests found in any institution of higher education; the new programs will have to be more eclectic than the old.

Gaff's book is well organized. Part I deals mainly with the intense controversy concerning the need for general education

reform. In this section Gaff presents evidence which leaves no doubt that the image of general education has been tarnished. Among other factors contributing to this decline are faculty specialization, departmental territoriality, the valuing of research and publication over teaching, the enrollment of more career-oriented students, and budget cuts. Fortunately, however, the debates now taking place on campuses across the country clearly represent a major rethinking of the purpose of general education and how to achieve it.

Part II describes the various educational philosophies, content, and teaching methods of the emerging general education programs, and the necessity for evaluation and administrative support. Especially worthwhile is the discussion of important principles that should guide the process of curriculum reform. The entire institution, declares Gaff, should be concerned with the fashioning of a coherent and achievable general education program. An attempt must be made to close the gap between the theory and practice of general education, for far too often there has been little connection between a philosophic statement of purpose and the curriculum seeking to carry it out.

Another guiding principle in the current reform movement is the emphasis placed on a generalist approach to learning and knowledge. This is not an easy thing to achieve when most faculty are specialists in a particular field.

According to Gaff, teaching general education courses needs to be perceived by both faculty and administration as a highly valued contribution to the institution's overall educational goal. This attitude is hard to achieve in the larger institutions where general education courses are often relegated to part-time or junior faculty. Service in the general education program is often viewed as a kind of pedagogical purgatory which must be served before one "moves up" to more prestigious courses.

After exploring the philosophies which undergird the new programs, Gaff discusses the emerging curricular patterns. The most common tendency is to increase the amount of general education while limiting the range of courses from which students can choose. Frequently, colleges adopt a combination of a core curriculum and a distribution pattern. In some cases the requirements are spread over four years, making general education an integral part of

Book Reviews Continued

a student's entire undergraduate program. There is also a definite move toward tightening academic standards and regulations. Values and skills are receiving greater emphasis; some programs call for "writing across the curriculum." Some institutions are working for greater integration of the undergraduate curriculum by requiring such things as an interdisciplinary baccalaureate essay.

Gaff makes the point that curriculum reforms and revised general education programs are only as good as the quality of instruction they provide. He chides the "strong acceptance of amateurism in college teaching." To combat amateurism, Gaff suggests that the findings of educational research be examined and the best of what we know about the teaching and learning process be applied to post-secondary education. In light of the research Gaff holds that general education courses should deal not only with the content of the discipline but with the method of the discipline -- not just the conclusions but how those conclusions are reached. Restructuring the course content in order to reveal the method of the discipline is necessary in order to engage the student in active, meaningful learning. To the lecture format, Gaff presents many alternatives which are designed to engage the student actively in the learning process.

The new general education programs incorporating revised philosophies, redesigned course distributions and updated methodological strategies require good administration, solid financial support, and thorough evaluation. Gaff makes a strong case for a representative general education committee and/or a special director to coordinate this part of the undergraduate curriculum since an academic dean and standing curriculum committee are principally engaged in monitoring existing programs. Successful new programs entail new expenses. Reimbursement for planning sessions, limitation of class sizes and the employment of evaluation systems designed to assess the effectiveness of the new program all cost money. Therefore, an institution committed to successful change will need to shift financial priorities and devote more of its budget to general education.

Gaff closes on a cautiously optimistic note. Although reform is far from universal, more and more colleges are returning to the goal of a broad education for all students. However, each institution with its own unique setting and circumstances should develop its own program, bearing in mind that a "curriculum is a social contract and

Tale from Culleoka, Tennessee

for my father

Once, when I was a boy, old man Paul Jordan
took me and his pet coon fishing. The sun
was just past being overhead; a dusty hot day

since before sunrise. That's why we decided to stop
at the spring for a cold gourd full of water
before we hit the river beyond the woods.

In the cool shade I took turns with Mr. Paul
rinsing our mouths and drinking from the chained
gourd while Zip grappled for crawfish.

His hands went way back under that hill
and his face didn't change as he
dragged something squirming from the spring.

But he must have suspicioned something because
instead of popping it straight in his mouth
he turned to look as he held up high

a wriggling black snake! Well, it was like
you could see the skin beneath the fur turning bone
white, as though he had pulled from under that rock

all the nightmare in the world. And his eyes!
Poor fellow, like those I saw in the face
of a young boy who fell on a broken bottle and

cut his throat. He flung that snake in the water
and tore out toward the house, not knowing it
wasn't a moccasin, not knowing piddling differences.

Just knowing snake. We found him in his box
under Mr. Paul's bed after he'd climbed the front
porch columns to the second floor and gone

through an open window. We lifted the fancy quilt
and there he was, two bright eyes among the dust
boogies and dull shadows, staring at us, staring
like he just caught sight of the drop edge of never.

by Jacquelyn Crews

Born in Diana, Tennessee, Jackie Crews is a technical writer for McCormack and Dodge, a software company based in Natick. She has published in *Tendrils*, *Plowshares* and was recently feature poet in *Salem State College's literary magazine, Soundings East*. Her Master's Degree in Fine Arts is from the Warren Wilson program in North Carolina. She has recently completed a manuscript entitled "The Spring at Diana, Tennessee."

curricular reform is a corporate activity." This development, however, need not be carried out in a vacuum and, as *General Education Today* demonstrates, the institution can profit greatly from the experiences of many colleges across the nation. As a college community, and more specifically the Bridgewater community, continues the task of general education revisions, Solomon-like wisdom will be required. Perhaps these wise words of Gaff should be kept in mind: "Reform proposals represent, quite simply, the best a college can do, if not the best to which individuals can aspire."

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Algeny

by

Jeremy Rifkin

Viking Press - 1983

The term "algeny" (a blend of the words "alchemy" and "genetics") is used by the author to denote the application of modern biological technology to perfecting the performance of living systems. In *Algeny* Mr. Rifkin attempts to persuade the reader that genetic engineering is a radical new form of human endeavor which should be abandoned because its implementation will certainly lead to a reduction in both the quality of the human experience and the quality of the cosmos itself. Genetic engineering is purported to be "as serious a threat to the existence of life on this planet as the bomb itself." "From a world teeming with life, a world spontaneous, unpredictable, dynamic, rhapsodizing, we descend to a world stocked with living gadgets and devices, a world running smoothly, effortlessly, quietly, without feeling. In the end it is companionship we give up, the companionship with other life that is at once both indescribable and essential, and without which existence becomes a meaningless exercise."

Although the book is based to a considerable extent upon philosophical, historical, sociological, and biological arguments, Rifkin's style is an enjoyable mixture of excited urgency, sardonic metaphor, and brimstone preaching.

Rifkin begins by considering major technological advances from fire through computers and genetic engineering as successive steps in the process of subduing nature. He argues that the human perception of nature simply reflects the degree to which natural phenomena have been conquered. Rifkin surveys the present and predicted capabilities of biotechnology, and concludes that the impending technological association of biology and computers is revolutionary enough to warrant a major shift in our view of humanity's relationship to nature.

For the most part, Rifkin's account of present biological knowledge is correct. We now have a firm grasp of the basic molecular principles whereby DNA, the hereditary material, controls the structure and function of living systems, replicates, and is passed on to the next generation. Individual cells (the fundamental building blocks of life) from unrelated organisms have been fused to form a single hybrid cell. Functional DNA has been transferred between species, and cells have also been modified by the incorporation of synthetic DNA into their own DNA.

However, in predicting the near future, Rifkin has fallen prey to accounts in the popular media provided by newspaper reporters, business executives and excited researchers who can now foresee heretofore unthinkable experiments. Many of his predictions are certainly open to debate, and the projected time frame is wildly

compressed. For example, Rifkin believes that within a generation parents may be able to select from among a broad array of traits to be incorporated into their children. Yet, Paul Berg, an eminent molecular biologist, in a recent summary of the prospects for genetic engineering in humans emphasized the massive technological obstacles to simply engineering away those inherited defects which are already well understood at the molecular level, let alone other more remote possibilities. Nevertheless, Rifkin's errors in substance and time frame do not negate the existence of an explosion in the understanding of mechanisms of biological control.

Rifkin goes on to explain his reservations to embracing a technology which will probably lead to radical redesign of many species, and quite conceivably to the origin of altogether new species. He believes that the subduing of life itself, with consequent adoption of eugenics, is going one step too far in the human march toward conquering nature in quest of security and immortality. Rifkin argues that we should forego the temptations of this new technology and



"Kevin"

Photographed by Robert Daniel, Professor of Education

instead obtain satisfaction by being content as members of the cosmos rather than its masters.

Rifkin believes that each culture generates a view of the cosmos which both reflects and justifies the activities of that culture. For example, Darwin's theory of evolution (more properly, the Darwin-Wallace theory) is seen as the cosmic view which necessarily appeared in the Industrial Age; hence, as we shift into the Age of Biotechnology we must be rejecting Darwin's tenets and substituting alternatives. Rifkin expounds at length upon Darwin's ties to the laissez-faire socio-economic conditions of the Industrial Revolution, his consequent exposure to a dog-eat-dog society, and his familiarity with the ideas of Malthus and Adam Smith. Overlooked are the biological observations which led both Darwin and Alfred Wallace to postulate the same mechanism of evolution. Rifkin implies that biologists are truly in the midst of overthrowing Darwin's ideas, when in fact we have merely expanded the original theory, filled in gaps with new information, and made minor modifications. The author's attack on the original theory is based upon a misunderstanding of this basic continuity in evolutionary theory as well as upon superseded ideas, misconstrued statements, and misinformation. One illustration is Rifkin's belief that the ancestry of the horse was deduced from a simple comparison of various skeletons on the basis of size. He is obviously unaware of the considerable body of evidence derived from potassium-argon dating, faunal associations, and the ages of geologic strata where fossils have been found. This attack on Darwin's theory of evolution is expanded to encompass the Oparin-Haldane theory of spontaneous origin of life on earth. Here again, the arguments are most unpersuasive.

Rifkin proposes that a "temporal theory of evolution" is presently replacing Darwin's theory. The temporal theory proclaims that selection by the environment is based upon the individual's ability to adapt to a changing environment, and it is specifically proposed that this ability has its basis in biological clocks. (Biological clocks are inherited mechanisms which enable organisms to detect and appropriately respond to cyclical fluctuations to their environment. Many plants, for example, flower in response to a specific regime of day-lengths which are detected and measured by their clocks). In actuality Rifkin's "temporal theory" is merely a modification of the Darwin-Wallace theory. It was Wallace who suggested that the environment selects in favor of those individuals who inherit traits that are best suited to that environment.

Thus, the new "temporal theory" of evolution is new in a semantic sense only.

In spite of Rifkin's inability to overthrow the Darwin-Wallace theory and demonstrate the joint introduction of a new Age and a new concept of the cosmos, his concerns about the ultimate uses of genetic engineering should receive attention, albeit in forums other than *Algeny*.

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The New Class War

Reagan's Attack on the Welfare State and Its Consequences

by

Frances Fox Piven
and

Richard A. Cloward

NEW YORK: Pantheon, 1982

In a time when the poor can detect no silver lining on any cloud, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward have come forward to paint that lining in their latest book, *The New Class War*. Their previous book, *Regulating the Poor*, was a description of the past, while this book is a prediction of the future. *Regulating the Poor* challenged the prevailing liberal assumption that social welfare systems in advanced industrial societies develop slowly but surely, like coral reefs, according to predictable patterns of demography and political economy. Rather, asserted Piven and Cloward, the growth and decline of welfare systems is cyclical; they grow to quell civil disorder by buying people off cheaply as in

The Reagan Administration has made such large scale and Draconian assaults on so many groups that it will face opposition from large numbers of people.

the 1930s and 1960s, and contract as the turmoil subsides, when they are used to enforce work norms, as in the 1950s and 1980s.

While this analysis squared with the experience of the poor and their advocates, it made the prospects of achieving a social welfare system that adequately met people's needs seem dim. Paradoxically, people on both the left and the right of the political spectrum were critical of social welfare programs, and some (rightists), seeking to dismantle the programs, borrowed (selectively) from leftist criticisms of those programs. Thus, liberals and leftists found themselves in the uncomfortable position of defending demeaning and inadequate programs against the assaults of the right. Those leftists who viewed welfare programs as band-aids for capitalism's terminal illness or, at best, "contradictions" in capitalism, were particularly hard put to come up with an adequate theoretical analysis to counter the *New Right*.

Piven and Cloward now offer both a theoretical and a tactical resolution to that dilemma in *The New Class War*. Written in November 1981, after the major depredations of the October 1981 Omnibus Reconciliation Act, it is intended as a kind of manifesto on "subsistence rights," to clarify the thinking of welfare advocates and to give them hope in the struggle for an adequate social welfare system. The book attempts much, outlining the history of subsistence rights from late medieval England to the present-day United States in only one hundred and fifty pages. Compared to the wealth of detail in *Regulating the Poor*, this is a sketchy book, but the authors' purpose was to publish it quickly as a tool to mobilize activists. Although some of its discussions of the Reagan program are already dated, it succeeds remarkably well in clarifying the nature and history of people's struggles for "subsistence rights," the present status of that struggle, and the tasks that activists should perform to carry on the struggle. The authors provide the arguments which allow us to criticize the failures of the welfare state while also seeing it as a positive, and limited, result of previous class struggle.

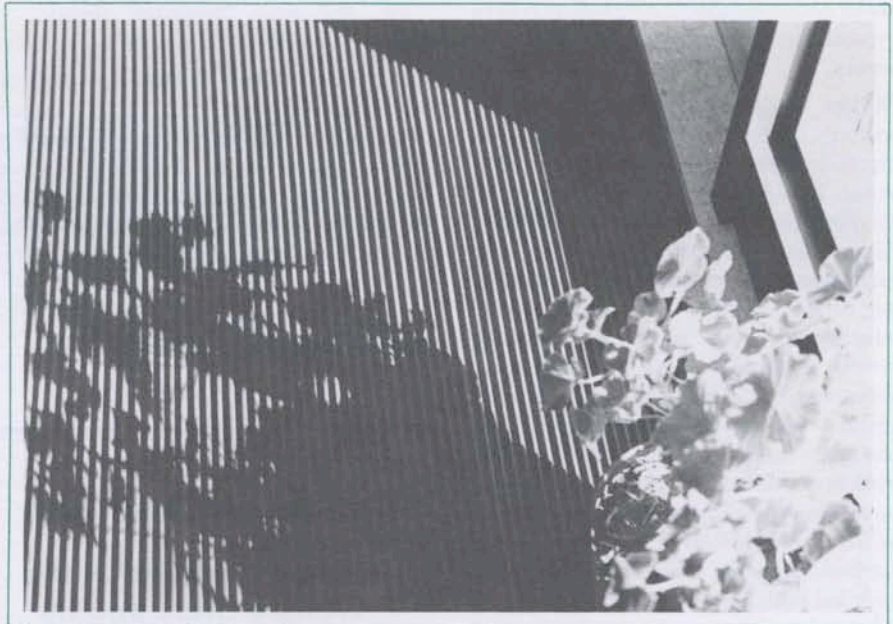
The authors argue that, despite the current round of cutbacks, the basic structure of the welfare state is here to stay because democracy, which in the beginning promised only civil rights, has expanded since the 1930s to include the concept that the state protects the economic rights of all citizens, not just of property owning citizens. The Right resists that concept under the ideology of laissez-faire and the "invisible hand" of the marketplace, but in actuality, since the beginnings of mercantilism, the state has supported business interests rather than working

people. That fact has become increasingly clear and this clarification of the role of the state has raised the consciousness of working people to strengthen their demands for state support of their right to a livelihood, whether that livelihood includes jobs, housing, medical care, services, or some form of income maintenance.

The authors argue that, while social welfare programs *have* been used to discipline workers, they are also hard-won victories which limit the power of capital over workers' lives. Social Security, unemployment insurance, welfare, social services, housing, food, and medical benefits do, indeed, protect the poor from the worst economic calamities and serve as a check on capitalist exploitation. It is this entrenchment of "subsistence rights" which the Right is attempting to weaken with the current cuts. If workers have no economic cushion to fall back on, they are more likely to put up with low wages and onerous working conditions. And they are less likely to strike, since food stamps and AFDC are no longer available to striking workers.

In their eagerness to prove their points, the authors distort some facts. They say, for example, that real wages did not fall during the 1970s, when in fact they *did* fall. While the wage picture differed for different sectors of the labor force (some people got richer, some poorer, and some stayed the same), yet the overall wage trend during the 1970s was down. (*Statistical Abstracts*, 1983-84) The authors argue that the "Phillips curve," which claims that high unemployment results in low wages, was proven invalid in the 1970s, when unemployment rose to its highest levels since the 1930s, but wages did not fall. This argument is important to their thesis, as they claim that wages did not fall because of the great expansion of social welfare benefits in the late 1960s and 1970s. The "industrial reserve army of unemployed" has traditionally deflated wages and workplace demands because workers who know that many unemployed people are waiting for their jobs are less likely to press for better wages and working conditions. Employers, for their part, point to the large supply of available workers as they resist their workers' demands. However, if workers can get food stamps and welfare when they strike, or unemployment compensation if they are laid off, their hand is strengthened in bargaining with employers. When no cushion of benefits is available, they must take any job at any wage with any working conditions. Or so the authors argue.

While the authors are certainly correct in saying that the programs that provide a



Flower Pot on the Windowsill

Photograph by Robert Daniel, Professor of Education

national minimum-income floor are being cut back as one part of a larger strategy to increase business profits, it is not true that the expansion of welfare benefits strengthened labor's hand enough to keep real wages from falling. The cushion was not as supportive as the authors claim -- a very thin cushion indeed for such a large army of unemployed.

But the problem may contain the seeds of the solution. The Reagan Administration has made such large scale and Draconian assaults on so many groups that it will face opposition from large numbers of people. No longer are the Reaganites simply attacking the most politically unpopular, and therefore most vulnerable, program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) -- which is, incidentally, the cheapest of all the federally-matched welfare programs. They have declared war on the entire working class, even segments of the working class such as PATCO that supported Reagan in the election. Surveys show that workers nowadays are less likely to blame themselves when forces beyond their control cause them to lose their jobs than they were in the past. And now, more than at any time in the past, workers recognize the role of the state in determining their economic well being. Piven and Cloward predict that many groups will recognize their common oppression and form coalitions to resist. They point to groups that have already begun the fight: environmentalists; religious, student, civil rights, and civil liberties groups; organized labor; the aged; women.

But will all of those groups recognize their common interests and fight together? While it is true that many diverse groups are

struggling against the New Right assault, it does seem that Piven and Cloward underestimate the difficulties this poses. There are sharp divisions between groups based on such things as class and ethnic antagonisms. Upper class environmentalists may not feel much in common with General Relief recipients. Whites resist minority demands for equality because they feel their jobs are threatened. Antagonism toward welfare recipients runs particularly deep in this country, especially toward people benefiting from means-tested programs such as AFDC and General Relief. (The "universal" programs, so much more common in Europe, escape the stigma because most people benefit from Social Security at some point in their lives.) When talking about "welfare cheats," most people don't have in mind those who commit ninety-three percent of the welfare fraud in Massachusetts -- the vendors who sell medical, dental, pharmaceutical, and other services to the state.

Yet on the other hand, there *have* been some encouraging alliances. Public service workers, municipalities, social agencies, and religious leaders formed an alliance with AFDC recipients to prevent the workfare program that would have displaced union workers in public service jobs. Many unions and other groups joined the Greyhound workers to walk their picket line. Workers at the Mass. Rehabilitation Commission joined with their disabled clients to resist massive purging of the rolls by the Reagan Administration, and won some victories. Only time will tell whether these small rivers will join to open the flood gates of economic democracy.

Betty Reid Mandell
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