

# THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

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Social condition is commonly the result of circumstances, sometimes of laws, oftener still of these two causes united; but when once established, it may justly be considered as itself the source of almost all the laws, the usages, and the ideas which regulate the conduct of nations: whatever it does not produce, it modifies. If we would become acquainted with the legislation and the manners of a nation, therefore, we must begin by the study of its social condition.

. . . The social condition of the Americans is eminently democratic; this was its character at the foundation of the colonies, and it is still more strongly marked at the present day. . . . Great equality existed among the emigrants who settled on the shores of New England. Even the germs of aristocracy were never planted in that part of the Union. The only influence which obtained there was that of intellect.

Alexis de Tocqueville traveled in this country for nine months in 1831 and 1832, and published his great commentary in 1835. His description of America's "social condition" above was followed by a prediction later in the volume:

The time will . . . come, when one hundred and fifty millions of men will be living in North America, equal in condition, all belonging to one family, owing their origin to the same cause, and preserving the same civilization, the same language, the same religion, the same habits, the same manners, and imbued with the same opinions, propagated under the same forms.

His prediction was not entirely accurate! *But* America, in de Tocqueville's eyes, was a democracy and destined to develop as one. It also is clear that the essence of democracy to him was equality.

How often we have read the great American declaration that "all men are created equal"! How often, too, a mental rebuttal has intruded to question whether we really meant it or not. Even as we declared in 1776 for equality, did we not own black men as slaves? And are not some people simply superior to others? Did we mean it? And, if so, *how* did we mean it?

Professor Rossiter (in *Goals for America*, '74) has a contemporary summary of what the word "democracy" in America has come to mean:

Democracy, let us remember, has a fundamental commitment to

equality, in the best and most realistic senses of that word; to equality before the law, equality of political voice, equality in constitutional rights, equality of opportunity, and equality of consideration.

This is a pretty fair summary of how we *do* mean it in the American society.

But de Tocqueville asserts a special *effect* of the concept of equality in this passage:

Equality suggests to the human mind several ideas which would not have originated from any other source. . . . I take as an example the idea of human perfectibility, because it is one of the principal notions that the intellect can conceive, and because it constitutes of itself a great philosophical theory, which is everywhere to be traced by its consequences in the conduct of human affairs. . . . The idea of perfectibility is therefore as old as the world; equality did not give birth to it, but has imparted to it a new character.

This “new character” is that human improvement is not circumscribed by the limits assigned to it by the aristocrats:

Aristocratic nations are naturally too apt to narrow the scope of human perfectibility; democratic nations, to expand it beyond reason.

Findings of the scholar J. B. Bury do not agree with de Tocqueville’s inferences that man has always conceived of “progress” as such. Indeed, according to Bury, man for many centuries—until the sixteenth, in fact—had not thought much at all about progress. Change in human affairs occurred so slowly that a single lifetime saw virtually none. Furthermore, after the periods of greatest glory in Greece and in Rome, how *could* man again attain even as much? By 1830 the world of de Tocqueville *was* changing within the observable experience of an individual life, and men were able to discern achievements and possibilities deserving of the term, progress.

The concept of equality, according to the brilliant Frenchman, gives birth to progress in this fashion:

In proportion as castes disappear and the classes of society approximate,—as manners, customs, and laws vary, from the tumultuous intercourse of men,—as new facts arise,—as new truths are brought to light,—as ancient opinions are dissipated, and others take their place,—the image of an ideal but always fugitive perfection presents itself to the human mind.

Thus the individual

tends unceasingly towards that unmeasured greatness so indistinctly visible at the end of the long track which humanity has yet to tread.

But some, of course, fear democracy, distrust not only its premises but also its processes and its sequences. Liberty, too, as an accom-

paniment to equality (and it is a very necessary companion), is distrusted in many places at home and abroad. Whatever reasoning is at the base of the distrust, be it aristocratic thinking, authoritarian thinking, or honest intellectual conviction, the forces of democracy and equalitarianism are strong in the contemporary world. Even where temporarily set back, they will continuously exert their pressure against the limitations on man, be the limits philosophical, legal, or institutional. It is the institutional system that takes our attention here.

De Tocqueville (in the initial quotation I used) viewed the "social condition" when once established as itself "the source of almost all the laws, the usages, and the ideas . . ." His observations imply, too, that social institutions spring from the social condition and that some of these institutions react then to change the conditions. The interaction proceeds constantly. Notably this is true of the system of education.

Plato was so aware of the influence of education on the social condition that he dreamed up an ideal system of universal education to produce the kind of citizen who in turn would make possible the ideal Greek city-state. He would begin, however, by "sending out into the country all the inhabitants of the city who are more than ten years old, and by taking possession of the children, who will thus be protected from the habits of their parents." He would then provide each child with full equality of educational opportunity, not knowing where talent might break out. But we note that Plato felt before his educational scheme could succeed, the social condition would have to be changed by getting rid of everybody over age ten.

Plato was a philosopher and philosophers are permitted *any* proposals! The practical world, however, cannot be dismissed. *We* cannot dismiss everybody ten years old and above! Indeed, no matter what ideals we hold for our society's ultimate attainment, we begin always where we are—with the facts. And among the facts we must reckon with are our sense of purpose and our conception of our society. Conception and purpose condition our collective thinking and become factors in determining the efforts we make as a people—their direction, their substance, and the results.

For even though we must take into account the vast educational development—or lack of it—which takes place outside the formal institutional structure provided explicitly by society, what we are obliged to consider here today is the latter. Our concept of ourselves as a people may differ from that of India or of Ghana or Brazil. Indeed, some national societies may be almost totally lacking a philosophical concept of purpose. Whatever the philosophy, however, it sets the course of the formal educational system.

In the American case I find a satisfying distillation of national purpose in the introductory sentences of the Eisenhower Report of the Commission on National Goals (1960):

The paramount goal of the United States was set long ago. It is to guard the rights of the individual, to ensure his development, and to enlarge his opportunity.

The Commission adds:

The status of the individual must remain our primary concern. All our institutions—political, social, and economic—must further enhance the dignity of the citizen, promote the maximum development of his capabilities, stimulate their responsible exercise, and widen the range and effectiveness of opportunities for individual choice.

Then follows a report with supporting essays, which are infused in every page with the role of education in removing barriers, opening doors, and exploiting the vast potential of knowledge for human growth and betterment. It is a marvelous statement of our central concept.

So our educational system is not lacking a conceptual context. What it may be lacking in any one state or region or in the nation as a whole is a conviction of priority on two levels.

*One level:* What priority within the total boundaries of economic possibility must we give education, as opposed to transportation, recreation, space exploration, and national defense, to cite a few competitors?

*A second level:* Within the system, what priority do we give, for example, the expansion and improvement of preschool education as an equalizer of opportunity—to provide, indeed, (Eldon Johnson) “opportunity for equality” for culturally deprived children—as against, on the other hand, expanding and improving vocational-technical education, or advanced graduate study in the sciences and technology, or the liberal arts at the college level.

Further, we are confronted with deciding the priorities of purpose—economic development as against social and aesthetic enrichment of our daily lives.

And within those decisions are many more. Do we succumb or not to what Ortega y Gasset called “the barbarism of ‘specialisation,’ ” a product in his judgment of education by mass-man?

In our prodigious efforts to have education serve the democratic purpose, will we have the wisdom to permit—even assist—a creative elite to emerge and, as Toynbee said of geniuses, “leaven the lump of ordinary humanity”?

Further, do we understand ourselves that the ideal democratic society must be the “self-renewing” society, using John Gardner’s now well-known phrase? Do we understand that education itself will serve—or can disserve—this purpose, depending on the what and how of its effort.

Finally, do we see clearly enough the indispensable role of freedom as the condition *sine qua non* of democracy at its best and of an education which has the chance to produce democracy?

I raise this last point about freedom in order to qualify explicitly my own interest and yours in education to serve economic growth—economic ends. The need to see clearly human beings as a resource, even what we call “the basic resource,” is important. Only a few days ago I spoke to a business group on this very thesis, urging upon them the economic necessity of developing certain kinds of *man-power*. The point indeed was a valid one, in which I believe. But even as I spoke, and shall do again, I reminded myself that education must be “investment in man”—to use the preferred phrase of Sir Eric Ashby—and that man is vastly more than an economic investment. Surely this is the major difference in the *materialistic* view of man, which finds considerable acceptance, even dominance, in the Soviet society, and the *whole* view of man which is the special devotion of a free, democratic society. Which brings me to a quick flashback to de Tocqueville’s assertion with which I began:

If we would become acquainted with the legislation and the manners of a nation, therefore, we must begin by the study of its social condition.

*Our* condition includes the freedom to define and redefine our goals in each generation and freedom for each individual to make choices. And it includes the persistent goal of equality of opportunity.

Our system of education, therefore, must serve the condition of freedom, the goal of opportunity, and the precious entity we call a man—all of him and all of them.