

The Tyranny of Idealism in Education*

Jacques Barzun

The oldest profession is not what people think it is. The oldest profession is that of the teacher, whether he is called so or simply acts as such from necessity, being a parent or elder. Teaching began on the first day and has never stopped, for two equally good reasons: ever-present, the new generations hungrily require a sop or a bone, and even if they did not, society must defend itself from their self-renewing barbarism. The educational question is therefore always open, asking to be answered. It is a highly ambiguous question and hence admits of many answers, as history shows. But it is never a “problem,” despite our foolish modern way of referring to it, for a problem is precise and seeks its one solution.

These simple facts would alone explain why in the mid-twentieth century we are still discussing education from the roots up, quite as if no one had ever given the matter thought. At bottom we all vaguely know what is needed and what we should do to provide it. But the perennial demand and the practical predicament have been complicated, during the last hundred and fifty years, by the desire to make the highest reaches of education accessible to everybody. This generous effort multiplies the difficulties not merely by increasing numbers, but also by deepening doubt as to what each or all should be given.

In the resulting tumult of voices reflective thought is hard to sustain. All the arguments for an ever-expanding education are, on the surface, plausible, whether they stress the pressure of numbers, the future of freedom, and the enlargement of leisure; or else the need for technical knowledge, the need for social capacities, the need for individual fulfillment. What is clear is that some of these purposes are mutually exclusive and that others cannot be provided for with our present means. As usual, the educational question can receive only an answer that is a compromise; and the compromise itself, which however stated is bound to be abstract, receives only an approximation in the uncontrollable diversity of practice.

All this should make us modest in our hopes and projects. Yet by custom the tone of educational discussion is utopian. Because the persons to be subjected to our schemes are young and weak and have no money and no vote, we think

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we can force them to embody every ideal imagining that occurs to us. The fact that no school has ever succeeded in imposing anything but superstitions and prejudices does not daunt the theorist. He ignores as trivial what the school can indeed do, which is to impart established ways of work and thought, and he pants at the task of procreating an ideal type of his own conceiving. This remotest of artificial inseminations ultimately leads to the neglect of everything properly scholastic, while it fails to produce the reformer's paragon.

The American schools of today can be seen as the battleground of these two purposes, traditional and scholastic versus utopian and philanthropic. Owing to the special conditions of our time, both objects can be represented as impracticable. On the one hand, the permissive, progressive, philanthropic system of the last thirty years has not produced the conspicuously happy and potent citizens; on the other, the dedication of schools to intellect seems to be prohibited by the size and character of the population.

Arrived at this impasse, the mind of the country should obviously take calm and consecutive thought, rather than spend itself in feverishly contriving still other ideal projections. If the best that schools can do is an approximation, and if the goal itself must, like political plans, fall within the circle of the possible; if, again, the schools of any given time must largely agree as to their function, then it follows that to be desirable *and* possible any change from present ways must have regard to the kind of period we think we are entering. Where are we now? Where are we going next? To settle the first question, comparison is a powerful aid: nothing clears the eye like a backward glance at some period, neither near nor far, whose uncertainties have resolved themselves with the passage of time.

Since, prompted by his centenary, we have barely finished re-assessing the work of Woodrow Wilson, it is doubly useful to take his educational period as a foil to ours, which is its direct successor. For when Wilson rose to the presidency by virtue of his eminence as an educational leader, the man who followed him in that role was his slightly younger contemporary, John Dewey, whose diluted and distorted influence has brought us to the impasse I have described.

The Wilson period stretches roughly from 1890 to 1914. It is that of the American high school, the great experiment of free and compulsory secondary education for all. It is the period of the renovated and rapidly expanding American college, and of the newly instituted American graduate school, at once dedicated to research and made to serve as a training ground for college teachers. That period in American history coincides with a notable intellectual awakening. Zeal for art collecting and for government reform, widespread social

criticism and a consciousness of the completed westward march, culminated in the rediscovery of Europe during the first world war. It was an era of vehement housecleaning, of intelligent advocacy of change, to which Wilson's political slogan of The New Freedom can be extended without violating its meaning: the old America must give way to the new without losing its essence.

Wilson himself summed up the tradition and hinted at its shortcomings in a passage of an essay of 1896: "The American spirit is something more than the old, the immemorial Saxon spirit of liberty from which it sprung. It has been bred by the conditions attending the great task which we have all the century been carrying forward; the task, at once material and ideal, of subduing a wilderness and covering all the wide stretches of a vast continent with a single free and stable polity. It is, accordingly, above all things, a hopeful and confident spirit. It is progressive, optimistically progressive, and ambitious of objects of national scope and advantage. It is unpedantic, unprovincial, unspeculative, unfastidious; regardful of law, but as using it, not as being used by it or dominated by any formalism whatever; in a sense unrefined, because full of rude force; but prompted by large and generous motives, and often as tolerant as it is resolute."

It was in the same year 1896 that Wilson made the Sesquicentennial Address at Princeton which singled him out as the future university president. In that speech, the theme of the peroration is like the sequel to the faintly critical survey just given above: "The days of glad expansion are gone, our life grows tense and difficult; our resource for the future lies in careful thought, providence, and a wise economy; and the school must be of the nation."

The change of pace and mood seemed logical, but what Wilson could see the need of, and what he began to work for six years later in the reshaping of Princeton policies, the rest of the country (and a good part of Princeton) could not be made to feel. All but one of Wilson's academic reforms (the system of preceptorials, or small discussion classes) were stultified by the continuance of the "optimistically progressive" spirit. While the muckrakers and reformers were trying to intellectualize the newly emancipated groups, these chiefly imbibed the "large and generous motives" that had raised them up, and thus helped to keep the national mind "unspeculative and unfastidious." The New Freedom in educational matters ought to have meant the parallel to Wilson's economics, namely increased discipline for the greatest liberty compatible with order. It soon came to mean, on the contrary, schoolroom *laissez-faire*, animated by a spirit not only progressive, optimistic, unfastidious, but also full of pretensions.

The brief Wilsonian era of reform, intellectual and aware, was replaced by the prolonged educationalist era, anti-intellectual and self-conscious, in which we are still floundering.

The transformation was worked by science. I do not of course mean the ideas of any nameable physical scientists. I mean the culture of science and its satellites – psychology, sociology, psychiatry, anthropology, and educationism generally. The thought of John Dewey made its way not as being consonant with the tradition and experience of teaching, but as superseding these in the name of scientific discovery. According to it the mind of man was mapped: it was found that the way to nurture the mind was to give it more latitude than longitude. Though William James had shown that the mind works like an artist, Dewey maintained that it works like a scientist – posing and solving problems, learning by doing, gathering evidence, consulting peers, socializing results. It is no play on words to say that out of the new school and its “problems” came the “problem child.” He too had to be solved, or as it was called, “adjusted.”

Meanwhile, the conveying of knowledge itself became an endless problem, that of devising “life situations” and “real experiences” which the pupil tackled successively as scientist, psychologist, or social worker. He in his turn grew self-conscious about his “method,” as is appropriate for the technical mind using a formula. Thus learning and instruction were eclipsed in a double manipulation – the teacher, almost unconcerned with subject matter, manipulating the child’s psyche; and the child, regardless of temperament, striving to manipulate the psyches and situations educatively submitted to his powers of cajolery and adjustment.

Long before this public-relations pedagogy became common, Wilson had foreseen the danger and its cause. “Science has not changed the nature of society, has not made history a whit easier to understand. . . it has not freed us from ourselves. . . . [But] it has wrought such instant, incredible improvement in all the physical setting of our life that we have grown the more impatient of the unreformed condition of the parts it has not touched or bettered, and we want to . . . reconstruct them in like radical fashion by like processes of experiment.”

Since to speak restrictively of science was already liable to misunderstanding, Wilson was careful to distinguish. What he warned against “is not the fault of the scientist; he has done his work with an intelligence and success which cannot be too much admired. It is the work of the noxious, intoxicating gas which has somehow got into the lungs of the rest of us from out the crevices of his workshop. . . .” An historian and political theorist cannot be, in the vulgar

phrase “against science,” but must oppose the mental habits of the science-mongers: “Can anyone wonder,” Wilson goes on, “that I ask for the old drill... the old schooling in precedent and tradition, the old keeping of faith with the past, as a preparation for leadership in days of social change? We have not given science too big a place in our education; but we have made a perilous mistake in giving it too great a preponderance in method in every other branch of study... we must turn back once more to the region of practicable ideals.”

Let us who look back dwell on that word “practicable” and feel the full force of what leads up to it. Though spoken sixty-three years ago, Wilson’s verdict must stand today unchanged, the fit summary of an “experiment” that has gone wrong.

The permanence of Wilson’s truth on this point does not mean that his views on education are still applicable entire. For one thing, unimaginable changes have occurred in the world; for another, he was himself secretly moved by an optimistic progressivism we can no longer trust. Having just seen the high school become a common institution which all American youths might enter, he could not suppose that the college would one day occupy a similar place in the free school system. He said it in so many words – college was “not for the majority who carry forward the common labour of the world... It is for the minority who plan, who conceive, who superintend, who mediate...”

We know better: college is for anyone who has not been repeatedly proved to be a dunce. College is for those who would engage in some seventy-five miscellaneous forms of business, all requiring a bachelor’s degree. College is for sociability and marriage, for vocational training in new industries and new professions beyond computing. College is the hope of the would-be electronic journalist and the aspiring master of coaching in team sports. In a word, Wilson had no inkling of what the American college could become under the two great influences already at work in his day. The one, “scientific” method, he warned against; the other, the large generous motives of a people growing daily more tolerant than resolute, he unwittingly fostered by his doctrines of “community” and “the whole man.”

Believing that what the college-bred minority wanted from their undergraduate years was an introduction to “the intellectual and spiritual life,” Wilson set about supplying that demand. The old college, before any graduate schools existed, might offer youth almost anything – dry-as-dust classical scholarship, Hebrew, physics, mathematics, theology. The great teachers were those who could combine the relevant parts of such subjects into something assimilable

by the student's groping sense of contemporary life. The fine arts, literature, history, and political economy were rarely offered.

The advent of the graduate school in the late 1880's shook up the college curriculum and led to two innovations – the transfer of pure scholarship to the post-graduate program and the enlargement of the college curriculum into a heap of free-for-all electives. Harvard achieved pre-eminence as the provider of both opportunities. The elective system, though somewhat modified by later movements emanating from Columbia – General Education and the Great Books – still dominates the American college. Its “flexibility” has meant that an A.B. can stand for almost any combination of subjects, though the rules in any one college conceal the laxity. Everywhere, it has come to seem reasonable that a student should collect “credits” like premium stamps until a certain total tells him: “You’ve finished!”

Wilson was the first to see the absurdity of free electives and to try to counteract it by his preceptorials, which are still one of Princeton's great educational attractions. The teacher, thought Wilson, must come to grips with the student's mind, and the student's with the subject. This can only be done by close and sustained discussion. Passively acquiring and regurgitating facts may stuff the memory for a time but will not involve and alter the mind and feelings, which is presumably what education is for. When the student truly learns from a teacher he learns not solely facts and opinions, but thought. How to think, how to work, what principles to apply to a situation that one has been able to analyze – all this remains in the person while the detail remains in the notebook.

Arguing from these premises, Wilson reached two conclusions, which he worded in a manner fraught with strange consequences. He began to speak of educating the whole man, and of doing this by transforming the college into a true community. Knowing what he was struggling against we see what he meant. But just as his preceptorials did not restore the principle of a curriculum, but were merely interlaced with the elective anarchy, so his notion of a college community did not patch up what he called the “almost absolute divorce between the studies and the life of the college.” Athletics and other activities, to which he gave a nod of recognition but which he wanted duly subordinated to intellect, did not find the lesser niche he would accord them. Rather, they were supplemented by a new set of plausible irrelevancies – convivial, psychological, and other – under the name of counseling, adjustment, and community living.

The whole man whom Wilson was trying to reach, by means of articulate thought and the play of personality, was the whole *mind* and its emotional roots.

But the whole man whom the college entertained for four years turned out to be a sociable (or alternatively, ill-adjusted) boy in search of a father, companionship, and a sweetheart. To facilitate this search, an elaborate “community” had to be recreated at great expense on every campus, so that now the main fixed charge of a college or university is not the cost of its faculty and library, but the cost of this social, remedial, and recreational apparatus. Teachers and books are still remote, not because students are out of touch with them – on the contrary, teachers now often overdo the comradely relation – but because they remain secondary in the educational economy. If anyone in speaking to a college student or college graduate should allude to Wilson’s splendid phrasing of his vision and ask “Where, actually, did you ‘live and form friendships in the garden of the mind’?” the spontaneous and honest rejoinder would be: “*What* are you talking about?” The dissociation of the college from intellect has come about not only because a college degree has acquired an enormous vocational value, but also because a kind of welfare state has developed on the campus and “living” has come to mean “the full life,” including a wife and children, debts and a nervous breakdown.

In so describing the present anomalous situation – one which would petrify with dismay all our educational theorists from Jefferson and Horace Mann to Wilson and John Dewey – one must refrain from assuming that the generation now undergoing education with its frills and fringes enjoys it more than its predecessors did the old austere kind. If it seems absurd or heartless to mention the now expectable nervous breakdown, as if the victim could help it, one must remember that education is a social and cultural affair par excellence, and that the years of college are perhaps a man’s most impressionable years. Hence the mode of life proposed by example and supported by official arrangements is likely to be followed very much as if it were part of the eternal order. In this light, the combination of study with married life or with full employment or with psychoanalytic treatment exerts a compulsion on the young which we underrate at our peril – and at theirs. One has only to think of the frequency of religious crises in an earlier day to see that the modern nervous breakdown is not wholly an accident, the collegiate marriage not wholly an individual choice: both are part of the whole-man-and-community education we have evolved. And not alone the intellectual goals that Wilson framed are now vanished, but the methodological intentions conceived by Dewey are also forgotten in a kind of in-service training to life and the proliferating professions.

Again, the radically changed view of what schooling and college are for should not lead us to suppose that the modern student is less serious and able than his progenitors. It is likely on the contrary that students today are, from high school on, more industrious. They take a more sober view of their fate than did their forebears who, belonging usually to a privileged class, could rely on the future being made easy for them and might thus be tempted to play their way through higher education. This difference between the two periods is heightened by the fact that the educational atmosphere and the national mind are now thoroughly democratized. Wilson could refer to the undergraduates in his charge as “young gentlemen”; today they are “the boys.” The point of the difference is that the elimination of the elegant idler has also eliminated the seeker after an intellectual education. The “bright boy” today wants to “qualify” for some post; for this he hopes to be admitted to a college whose name will advertise his own worth; and while he is subjected to “general education,” he impatiently looks forward to the years when he can develop “his specialty.”

To put the same facts in other words, the world at large has effected a sort of merger with the academy, by which technical specialization and research are part of workaday enterprises, at the same time as workaday standards and habits are part of academic learning. It is now possible to “study” nearly everything – business management and creative writing, “newscasting” and personnel administration, stagecraft and “human relations.” All these subjects are adorned with the tag “principles of,” though the expounders themselves would be hard put to it to show a principle or define the word in relation to the contents of their lectures. Though it is worth three credits toward a doctorate in education to learn for a whole year “methods and research in the teaching of typewriting,” no one has ever argued the case for this regal expenditure of time upon a matter which any organ resembling a mind could grasp in a few hours’ reading of a manual. Why the assumption that the whole of our material existence – the tricks of every trade – must be decanted into the vials of learning?

The answer probably is that we are unconsciously yet systematically trying to dispense with intellect. Wilson liked to quote the experienced teacher’s adage that “the human mind has infinite resources for resisting the introduction of knowledge.” This, generalized into a principle of training, leads to the educational plan of discussing rules of thumb before passive listeners and inciting them to pay heed by telling them that this is the gateway to “the industry.” This purely conventional knowledge creates its own appetite by maintaining in

the supposedly practical world a vast structure of make-believe; it also serves in the academic world by providing an easy substitute for speculation and literacy.

Forty years ago, in addressing a congress of salesmen in Detroit, Wilson, then president of the United States and seeking re-election, reverted for a moment to his educational experience and confided to his listeners that “college boys are the greatest conservatives I ever tackled in my life, largely because they associate too much with their fathers.” And he added the simple remedy: “What you have to do with them is to take them up upon some visionary height and show them the map of the world as it is.” There is no record of how the salesmen responded to this alarming proposal to exhibit the world as it is. The chances are that such a scheme of higher education sounded to them at once too simple and too difficult. Certainly the post-Wilsonian leaders of education have rejected it as inadequate and unworkable, both. They argue that some who are taken on a height are blinded by the sun and see nothing; others see something, but not as it is; still others refuse the climb because the prospect of steady ascent does not “appeal” to them.

For these reasons, simple institutional goals based on literacy and intellectual effort and tending toward clear and comprehensive views of the world also do not “appeal” to the guardians and theorists of education. They prefer the many idealisms which this visual realism denies. Their objectives are familiar: the development of the whole man, effectiveness in community living, enlightened, democratic, cooperative citizenship – the whole topped off with a touch of the current lingo and technique of a particular occupation. Theorist and public confidently believe that this constitutes preparation for life. The advocates and interpreters continually use all the “ideal” words – broadening, enriching, liberating, exciting – while the student finds rather that the course grows longer without enhancing his native powers or his joy in living. He can no longer be accused of associating too much with his father, who is now recessive and silent; but the student and his mentors are certainly associating too much with the phantasms of a world which is not the real one. And this unreality accounts, quite naturally, for the refuge both groups increasingly find in the arts, particularly music.

There can be, of course, no going straight back to some happier scheme. Education is always inadequate, its pure purpose flawed by those who give it as well as by those who take it. But one element which belongs to it, and which we have suppressed in favor of ideal projections since Wilson and Dewey struggled with an older pedantry, is still there to be used as a tonic and a test: that

element is intellectual work, the use of the mind for creating order in a man's perceptions and thoughts about the world. Everything else, character included, is a by-product, and hence impossible to "give" or even to cultivate directly.

Nor, in the end, is this effort of intellect to know itself and its surroundings a selfish individual pursuit, though even if it were it would still be the only possible goal of higher education properly so-called. When sufficiently widespread the individual effort does not remain a private good but has a national result, as Wilson, once again, made evident: "America will be great among the nations only in proportion as she finds an adequate voice. . . . She will not be known until she is understood; . . . her wealth will not interpret her, or her physical power, or the breadth of her uncounted acres, or anything she has builded; but only such revealing speech as will hold the ear and command the heed of other nations and of her own people. Our thinkers must assist her to know herself."