

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Education and Liberty: by James B. Conant

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Philippine Studies vol. 1, no. 2 (1953): 174–176

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BOOK REVIEWS

EDUCATION AND LIBERTY. By James B. Conant. Harvard University Press, Cambridge. 1953. pp. xii-168. \$3.00

This most recent of Dr. Conant's publications is a small volume containing the three Page-Barbour Lectures delivered by the author at the University of Virginia in 1952. Some sixty pages of notes have been added to supplement the comparatively brief text of the lectures proper.

The central theme of the three discussions appears in the book's subtitle: "The Role of the Schools in a Modern Democracy", or, in laymen's language: What is the function of schools in the establishment and preservation of democratic liberty. Probably because Dr. Conant is not a philosopher but a scientist, his approach to the problem inclines to the factual and, unfortunately, is not infrequently marred by unwarranted assumptions and fanciful interpretations of both British and American social and historical phenomena.

The first lecture called "The Anglo-Saxon Tradition" consists chiefly of a comparison between the secondary schools of England, Scotland, Australia, and New Zealand and those of the United States. From his inquiry, obviously cursory, since he spent but two months in Australia and New Zealand, the learned gentleman from Harvard concludes that those of the United States are superior because they charge no tuition and are sufficient in number to care for all the country's secondary school age youth. Indeed, the rather large proportion of non-public institutions flourishing throughout the British Commonwealth group both astonished and, to be quite frank, dismayed him. Such schools, in his opinion, foster what he chooses to call "undemocratic" classification, economic inequality, and social snobbery.

Lecture II treats of the American liberal arts college, which, according to Dr. Conant, although stemming from Oxford and Cambridge like all other Anglo-Saxon institutions of higher learning throughout the world, has developed into something entirely unique. From schools primarily professional in nature, the American college has become almost wholly devoted to general education. Concom-

itantly, an even sharper variant in the American developmental process occurred in the shape of an enormous increase in both the number of such colleges and in the size of their respective enrollments. Prominent among the factors effecting this twofold evolution was, Dr. Conant thinks, the common American delusion (called by him a "belief") that what is beneficial for some is also beneficial for all. Needless to say, the author prefers the American practice of late, to the British practice of comparatively early, specialization. The American way is more "democratic". Specialized studies, although of course necessary, tend to classify people. Classification is "undemocratic".

In Lecture III, entitled "Looking Ahead", Dr. Conant expatiates on the American-type comprehensive high school as democratic liberty's brightest hope and staunchest support. By the term "comprehensive", lay folks should understand, he means an institution which provides a course in practically every conceivable area of adolescent interest and aptitude from soap carving to atomic energy. In this dream school, avers the lecturer, all the youth of the community, irrespective of sex, race, creed, or socio-economic standing, will gather to live, learn, and play together as in one large happy family. Here will be found in ideal proportion democracy's need for both unity and diversity. Indeed, at this juncture, the author allows himself to be so emotionally carried away with admiration for this largely imaginary institution as to assert that "progress" *requires all secondary schools to conform to its pattern*, and, even more amazingly, that "The greater the proportion of our youth who fail to attend our public schools, and who receive their education elsewhere, the greater the threat to our national unity".

This last statement will convey to the reader some indication of the spirit in which Dr. Conant has conducted his inquiry into this very urgent problem of the relation between schools and liberty. Unfortunately, his treatment is not the careful and objective study one has a right to expect from a university president, but a tendentious, superficial, romantic apologia for the American public school. Actually, the position he assumes bears striking resemblances to that proposed for years in the propaganda publications of Teachers College, Columbia University, and of the well-known American public school pressure group, the National Education Association. Perhaps it is significant that Dr. Conant was admitted into the latter body's inner circle in 1941, and was given that same body's American Education Award in 1947.

Somewhat over four years ago the author of *Education and Liberty* wrote: "A wide diversity of beliefs and the tolerance of this diversity have constituted the bedrock of our national unity" (*Education in a Divided World*, p. 97). The thoughtful reader may well wonder what has occurred in so short a period to provoke the

apparently contradictory view exhibited in the present volume in the face of that very same diversity. From the earliest colonial days non-public and religious schools have constituted an integral and highly important element in the educational system of the United States. The same is true of the British Commonwealth nations. Liberty and democracy have thriven on them. Of the fifty-five signers of the American *Declaration of Independence*, only one is known to have attended the public schools. Indeed, up to the final quarter of the nineteenth century, publicly controlled educational establishments played a very minor role in American life. This elementary historical fact convicts Dr. Conant of a grave error in his insinuation that the present proportion of non-public schools in the United States (about 10 per cent) is a departure from the traditional American pattern. The truth is quite the contrary. The real innovation is the contemporary government-controlled, monopolistic, secular school.

On the whole, the views expressed and implied in *Education and Liberty* on the question of schools and democracy, while pretending to be democratic, strike this reviewer as dangerously close to outright totalitarianism. Unity and uniformity have become Dr. Conant's magic watchwords. The diversity of opinion which in 1948 he regarded as "the bedrock of our national unity" is now a "threat". His logical next step is to advocate the elimination of the "threat" by destroying, directly or indirectly, the God-given freedom of parents to choose for their children the kind of education they think best and forcing them *à la* Hitler and Stalin to conform to the pattern prescribed by himself and his coterie from Columbia and the National Education Association.

FREDERICK FOX

EDUCATION OR CHAOS. By Jose M. Hernandez. A pamphlet reprint of ten articles previously published singly in *The Manila Times*. Manila. 1953. pp. 2-64. Appendix.

Dr. Hernandez is to be congratulated on this pamphlet. Likewise *The Manila Times* for having given these ideas space. It is refreshing to hear a man speak out so loudly, so boldly and so well on such a vital national topic as the educational set-up.

I suppose that most all who know the facts and who are unprejudiced, will agree with his general picture. Regarding the public schools, Dr. Hernandez maintains that they are engaged in the mass production of spiritually, morally and intellectually deficient students (what Dr. Hernandez calls "potential hoodlums"), ignor-