

[Part of lecture on U.S. ?]

"Experiences in Vienna and America" (Contd)

11. AMERICA

The American experience seems to confirm the fact that the social effectiveness of education depends in a definite manner upon social reality.

My American experience is a very much more limited one than the Austrian. A six weeks stay in the Middle West, an eight weeks tour of the Central and Eastern South, as well as a few weeks spent in the East, that is all. But I had the opportunity of short stays at some 30 colleges and universities, as well as of interviews, visits, etc. at High Schools (senior grade schools). Incidentally, I was asked to advise on a "Study Plan on Social Sciences" at a progressive High School in the Middle West and had some official contacts with the Office of Education of the U.S. in Washington, which introduced me to the Federal Agencies dealing with the relief of the Youth with Civil Conservation Camps and so on.

The well-known and somewhat perplexing paradoxes of the American education situation may be summed up thus:

- a) Fundamentalist religious tenets enforced by State legislation - complete lack of religious education or teaching at State Institutions of any kind whatsoever.
- b) Idealist "uplift" - materialist practical philosophy; extreme constitutional traditionalism.
- c) Experimental creative attitude.
- d) A measure of superficiality - a very high national average of education.

Some striking feature of the situation.

a) The complete separation of the Church and State enforced in order to safeguard religious liberty in a deeply religious community led to highly paradox results in the States.

Though in some of the fundamentalist States of the U.S. anybody is liable to instant dismissal for a mere mention of Darwinism, at the same time at the State Teachers Colleges every vestige of a religious atmosphere has been removed by a ban on religious teaching enforced by the State Authorities. This ban was meant as a safeguard against religious freedom from secular encroachment, but has resulted in the educational field in a complete freedom from religion.

Education is thus in America practically more secularised than under the Social Democratic School Reform in Vienna. Conjointly with a very marked development towards departmentalism in religious belief, it explains the striking secularisation of the thoughts, work and life of the whole community without any distinctive

B) Although throughout public life a very high degree of idealism is professed, and often practiced, education is confessedly aimed at the purely practical purpose of enabling the young to earn a living as quickly and efficiently as possible. The "job" is not only the main concern but also the chief hobby of the young in vacation time. In fact young boys are traditionally almost as keen on jobs as the grown-ups are in the depressed areas of England. (Incidentally, - imagine the shock which unemployment, more especially youthful unemployment must have meant to a school system which sees its only justification in helping to get jobs for the youth. For what is the purpose of the school, once the boy cannot get a job, anyway?) In fact, the American educationalist often cannot answer the question satisfactorily, why a definite subject, a definite matter of no definite practical value should be included in the curriculum.

On the other hand, as you will see later on, the idea that school and education must have a practical value works out as a strong motive towards the use of the school as a vehicle of social co-operation, an instrument of developing new organs of conscious adaptation to environment, etc., not similar social values of a higher type.

C) The task of setting up a social equality does not fall on the school in the U.S.A. in common human appreciation both on the side of the rich and the poor equality is a fact. So is equality in speech, manners, behaviour for some 80% of the population (excluding the Negroes). The rich man does not feel socially superior to the not rich, the common citizen does not feel socially inferior to the rich. (Exceptions are of course numerous, but do not affect the fundamental facts) THUS EQUALITY IS ACHIEVED -- setting to schools the task of establishing equality would be beside the mark.

On the other hand, the differences of income between different individuals and groups do mark definite social differences between them. Such differences of "belonging to this or that set" are numerous; they correspond to the English social strata. But they are different in character from these.

They are not marks of descent, upbringing, breed and breeding, but of income. You move into a set when your income rises and move out of it again when you lose your income, moving into the set corresponding to your present income. Thus CASH brings the groups together and also separates them again (in a sense). This kind of group distinction is less deep and yet more brutal and harsh than any else. But it is very much mitigated by the fact that the ups and downs of income are frequent, the different members of one and the same family often living on different social level according to the period into which their earning capacity fell. The youngest one would be a University Professor while the oldest brother would be a miner, with another 5 or 6 brethren on a sliding scale of income grades and corresponding social sets). Thus friends are often separated by a change in their social sets, but the cleavage is more factual than one affecting self valuation. While in England social cleavage is so deep that for the sake of appearance they must in many ways be artificially bridged.

Here again, as in case of the effect of unemployment on the ideals of education, the influence of actual economic and social conditions becomes strikingly apparent.

Actual unemployment idea of job-getting school; refutes in practice the

actual frequency of change in income mitigates very considerably the effect of social differences based on variations in income.

actual employment and an ever rising standard of life for practically everybody means a justification of the general belief in an order of society that claims to be the freest and most equal and most fair every conceived.

THE UNDERSTANDING OF AMERICAN SOCIAL THOUGHT IS IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT RELATING IT TO THE ACTUAL SOCIAL CONDITIONS OBTAINING DURING THE PERIOD IN WHICH THIS CONCEPT OF SOCIAL LIFE WAS DEVELOPED:

This is the clue to perhaps the most essential trait in the American attitude to society. Thus:

D) It is only superficially true that the American attitude towards society as a whole is "materialistic" in that sense of the word in which it means a valuation divorced from ultimate ideals and related instead to personal gain and advancement. In fact the opposite is true. The American is convinced of the fundamental righteousness of the social order. He believes that it has produced the highest degree of material welfare to all, that it affords opportunities to all, in fact makes everybody free and equal. In a sense this is true. Thus the American, disregarding the very important qualifications of this truth, believes in his society and upholds it as the highest fulfilment of God's purpose on earth. He does this, in a sense, irrespectively of the fact whether he believes

in God or not, for his belief in society transcends religion in the paradox sense of the term. It is a direct expression of his faith in life. His views and opinions about the whole of society must therefore be regarded as equivalent to religious convictions.

The Webbs call the Communist regime in Russia a creedocracy. The U.S.A. too are, in a wider sense, a creedocracy - only of a different creed.

E) The Covenanters founded a society not a state or a nation. In the U.S.A. the political state is banished by the Constitution to a remote corner in society. It exists only on sufferance and on condition that it will on no account try to gain powers and competences similar to those enjoyed by the European States. Thus society in the U.S.A. exists without the props of the political state. The American does not think of society as being supported by or based on the power of the state or of any kind of force whatever. The U.S.A. Federal Government has no police powers, in fact no effective powers in home affairs whatever. There is no police. Society is supposed to look after itself. Anarchy is here realised.

Social reality is at the back of these educationally decisive social ideals. The general belief is the ultimate validity of the principles of this society is its only support. It is delivering the goods: an unprecedented standard of life and a great equality of chances. After all there are not more than a small percentage of very rich and more ~~more~~ than a moderate percentage of down and outs in the United States, and those are almost all recent immigrants. The rest, the vast majority are the best fed, best clothed, best housed, and on the average certainly the best educated, people in the world. (The economic crisis although it has made an indent on the minds and thoughts of the people has not yet decisively changed this appreciation). This is the outcome of the experiment started by the Covenanters. It has not yet come to an end. It still continues. This is the meaning of the well-known phrases: "How do you like America?" adn: "We are a new country." These phrases mean in America these last 150 years what they mean in Soviet Russia to-day, and probably in the next two hundred years, i.e. the attitude of a people taking part in a vast experiment (only with the curious difference that in the U.S.A. there is a very distinct element of vagueness and uncertainty where all this will lead to? while in Russia the aim and end seem to be known and fixed in a manner beforehand). On the whole there is no country more similar to Soviet Russia than the U.S.A.-, the only other country in modern history that is the outcome of a conscious and deliberate determination to found a society. The real difference between the two is that the Russian effort is on an altogether higher plane.

Yet the U.S.A. should not be under-estimated as happens so often in this country. Its obvious weaknesses are partly due to its being a "new country." Although the lower layer of educational attainments is low indeed, the average level of the education attainment of the masses is unprecedentedly high. The experimental attitude, e.g. is often regarded as a very much misplaced application of a technocologically fruitful principle to the cultural field. But this experimental attitude is only partly due to the American tradition of starting everything anew, partly it expresses a highly positive relatedness of the school to the task of society building.

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Here/are touching on a very important aspect of the educational task under the conditions given in social reality in America.

1) It was in the nature of the society founded by the Covenanters that the relationship of individual life and society should be direct and immediate. The individuals thought of themselves as running this new society, all by themselves, without the intervention of any kind of authority, bureaucracy, political state or government. THIS IS THE ORIGIN OF THE EXTREME PLASTICITY OF AMERICAN SOCIETY. There is nothing between the individual and society.

2) Rapid and constant change is an outstanding feature of American social history. As a rule, the environment changed inside twenty years to such a degree as to transform the economic and social function of every single element in it completely.

THIS IS THE REASON WHY AMERICAN KNOW MORE ABOUT SOCIAL CHANGE THAN ANY OTHER PEOPLE IN THE WORLD (excluding U.S.S.R.)

These two facts account for the CONSTANT CONCERN OF THE AMERICAN FOR THE ROLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL and the small group of individuals IN THE CHANGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT. The PLASTICITY of society and the fact that CHANGE WAS THE ONLY CONSTANT THING in his experience to account for it. The American knows incomparably more about the role of the individual and the small group in social change than we do. If one day the Americans ceased to believe in their society and therefore to run it, it would instantly change -- for there is nothing to prevent it from changing.

This is the social background of the belief in the formative value of education to society in the U.S.A. Insofar as education in doctrinates (as the American phrase

runs) the child with these ideas and principles, it is more than in any other country the direct formative and supporting force in society

Thus the achievements of American education from the point of view of American society and its improvement (if only in the American sense) depend for their effectiveness on two preconditions: on the existence of given SOCIAL IDEALS and on the environmental factor of SOCIAL REALITY ITSELF.

Whether we take the Austrian case of an education aiming at a transformation of society or the U.S.A. example of an education which, though progressive, is essentially conservative, the result is the same.

The possibility of socially effective educational efforts in the abstract, i.e. detached from the concreteness of society is an illusion.