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"What Does Your Father Do?" "Nothing"*

by Roger Wilcox
Professor of Psychology, Ohio University

Campus cynics maintain that a college professor is one who understand the eighteenth century perfectly but has yet to compile a bibliography on the forthcoming nineteenth century. The assertion is only partially true because many professors are still carping about the details of the eighteenth. Only time will tell. Frankly, I wish we had the time but it seems to me that time has simply passed us by -- the old parade cliche. Witness the fact that recent numbers of Teaching Learning Issues examined such tired controversies as the "Faculties of the Mind" and "College Entrance Requirements." Surely the intent was to clear the way for more urgent matters.

For anyone with even a marginal sense of historical perspective, the Doctrinal of Formal Discipline was a dead horse when Adolph Hitler was only 35 and still feeling somewhat absurd from his farcical Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. Thordike, Edward L. "Mental Discipline in High School Studies," Journal of Educational Psychology, 15 (1924), 1-22 and 83-98. and entrance requirements had ceased to concern nearly anyone who had taught in college prior to 1930 and had known his or her students as actual human beings. Hearsay evidence, ca., 1960, Dr. Sidney Pressey, Ohio State University. That such issues should seem brand new to the succeeding generations of academicians speaks uncharitably of the way in which we attend to each other's insights. All of this is by way of saying that far too many people ill higher education are debating, however sincerely or elegantly, faded insignificant issues while far more urgent concerns go unheeded. These debates could be unfortunate since American higher education seems to have become the cultural agent responsible for the development and maintenance of a rigid caste system, rather than the wellspring of an enlightened and increasingly freed humanity as we had so hoped. There is even the remote possibility that future generations of our college graduates may actually destroy America but we will return to this point later. For now, let us examine our paradox.

**TECHNOLOGY AS EMPTINESS**

The development of a burgeoning technology has not only made a number of demands upon our society but has also resulted in a growth toward environmental and social complexity. As the culture has become more complex, the need has arisen for brighter persons while at the same time the need for the less capable or poorly educated has diminished; and it seems clear that higher education will be called upon to train and provide an elitist cadre to maintain and supervise our elegant technology. As population density increases, however, technological improvement is reducing the number of meaningful work positions available for the populace to fill. In order to highlight the significance of the word "meaningful," consider, for instance, the Babu, or educated class of India. The situation there has degenerated to such an extent that as many as four to six clerks may be assigned to the same desk and position in order to create the illusion of being educated, employed, and worthwhile. Needless to say, with such a diffusion of responsibility, very little, if anything, is accomplished by the typical Babu. Bennett, Joseph. "The Theory and Practice of No-work; The Babu Bureaucracy," Intellectual Digest, II (4) (1971), 12.

It will also be the case that the poor will be more readily excluded from the technological mainstream by virtue of their inability to participate successfully in the various levels of the educational enterprise. Thus, the overall situation is becoming one in which fewer and fewer will be allowed to participate in the culture in meaningful ways. Obviously the most logical set of criteria for the requisite "selection" or "weeding out" process will be based upon education as a achievement.

**THE CHANGING CONCEPT OF LABOR**

Table 1 shows the role that man plays as a source of the Earth's energy and indicates that human beings are no longer involved in the production of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>1850</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1970</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Table 2 depicts the number of workers in certain general occupational areas and reveals that since 1900, those involved in farming have diminished by a factor of three while the number of persons employed in education, has increased by a factor of six. This change, together with the 4,650,000 information processors—a group of purveyors which includes TV, radio, and wire service personnel, and even gossip columnists—indicates that the concept of labor has been altered drastically in the last half century and suggests that the less capable may be doomed to play an increasingly insignificant role in America’s development. This diminished role may occur because of the way in which the nature of work has changed from the relatively simple to the relatively complex and because such changes are not easily adapted to by the less bright and poorly trained. As an aside, it may be sobering to consider the basic nature of a culture in which more people print newspapers and push deodorant on television that toil to feed us and light our lamps. It is wishful thinking to imagine that these masses have been elevated to anything “higher.”

SCHOOLING AS SUSPENDED ANIMATION

Table 3 shows the actual number of people in one level of school or another; the number accounts for fully 29.3 percent of the estimated 200,000,000
living Americans. Two trends are of interest in this regard, the first being the extensive growth of technical training, with the second being the call for more "practical" training in our colleges and universities in the hope of guaranteeing a graduate better adapted to fitting into the technological world. Editorial Staff. "Jobs for College Graduates," *U.S. News and World Report*, LXXI (26) (December 27, 1971), 30-33. Such extended training serves the additional purpose of keeping large numbers of young people both out of, and out of competition with, the labor force. For those readers who are data conscious, a recent survey of the California State College System, believed by some to be a model agency, showed that the average student was taking 6.4 years to graduate with a B.A. degree. Frankly, there is nothing very charming about a group of 25-year-olds graduating from college at the baccalaureate level—particularly if one is a taxpayer. It may be, however, that higher education has become the graceful, accepted way to move in a certain limbo from the urgent beauty of adolescence to a somewhat bored and tired maturity in the late 20's. This observation highlights the issue of the variety of uses to which higher education is being put—few of which are clearly understood.

**CULTURAL WRECKAGE AS RAW MATERIAL FOR A CASTE SYSTEM**

If America is to develop a caste system, it is necessary to have a group of people who can be forced into becoming the bottom layer. Such a group would possess at least most of the following unfortunate characteristics: marginal education, marginal employability, low-level income, crippling personal and/or social problems, and only marginal dietary and health capability. Table 4 reviews the latest relevant statistics and, excluding gross overlap, shows that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population Grouping</th>
<th>Census Figures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployables</td>
<td>2,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentally Restricted</td>
<td>50,920,000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very, Very Poor</td>
<td>29,700,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Alcoholics</td>
<td>6,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug Addicts</td>
<td>1,200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housed Criminals</td>
<td>1,221,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housed Mental Patients</td>
<td>500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatric Outpatients</td>
<td>435,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme Social Deviates</td>
<td>250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitutes, B-Girls, Etc.</td>
<td>400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>92,626,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Intelligence Quotients of 90 and Below

nearly 40 million Americans could qualify for membership in the lowest social stratum *today*. Although it may seem callous to consider the unfortunate in this way, it is imperative to be realistic in assessing the role that such people may be compelled to play in a society becoming ever more technological and complex.

Regarding Table 4, there is a certain amount of overlap between the categories, e.g., a mentally restricted, very, very poor drug addict. Since the only function of the table is to provide something of the feeling of a rude awakening for those who yet picture America as a relatively untroubled land of plenty, it seemed senseless to attempt to arrive at "the" census figure for our least fortunate citizens. Although corrections could be applied to the table to control for such overlap, the conclusion remains inescapable that America does have available a tremendous number of persons who could be coerced into the lowest stratum of a caste system. Which, in fact, they are.
Allowing for overlap, what we have here is a staggering number of persons, about one in every five, for whom inconceivable social energy and money would need to be expended in order to change either them or their life style appreciably. Though our politicians are quick to talk about "The Great Society," the legislation enacted in no way suggests that our country is actually committed to diminishing this puzzling and demeaning social inequity.

In order to comprehend the practical implications of this problem, consider the fact that of the Earth's 3.5 billion persons, one billion are starving while an additional one billion are badly malnourished. Since there is no evidence of a world-wide population decline, until such time as there occurs either mass starvation, pestilence, or thermonuclear war, the actual proportion of the Earth's hungry must simply increase. This could be catastrophic since a number of recent researchers have established predictive relationships between nutritional deficiency and decreasing levels of intellectual functioning. Consequently, we may expect a general decline in the available pool of human intelligence and at precisely the moment in time when the entire world is beginning to model itself along scientific-technological lines. Lest we attempt to rationalize our way out of this particular dilemma via America's plentitude, it is disconcerting to read that the average level of tested intelligence in the British Isles has declined significantly since the turn of the century. Burt, Sir Cyril. "Standards in the Three R's Have Fallen Since 1914," New York Times Educational Supplement, February 6, 1970. Great Britain hardly qualifies as one of the world's poverty pockets.

In summary, since research has shown a link between nutritional deficiency, and 1) intelligence, 2) birth trauma, 3) neurological impairment, and 4) premature birthing, we may assume that human intelligence as a global resource must suffer a decline. Such a development will obviously focus undue attention upon higher education as the source for both understanding and remediation programs, and it seems doubtful that we can provide either in sufficient amounts.

IS WASHINGTON STILL BURNING?: A DEPRESSING ASIDE

It has happened that 259,500 well educated graduates of the class of 1971 could very probably remain either underemployed or unemployed, and perhaps it would be wise to seriously consider Eric Hoffer's observation:

The inadequate employment of intellectuals is a potent, revolutionary factor. The Chinese sage, Mo Ti, declared twenty-five centuries ago that Chi and Chow lost their empires and then their lives because they would not employ their scholars. Hoffer, Eric. The Ordeal of Change. New York: Harper& Row, 1963.

Those of us in higher education do not typically concern ourselves with such issues but it could be that the nation's fulsome supply of college graduates is in fact a mixed blessing. It may be true that the burning wreckage and loss of life at the University of Wisconsin and the continuing arson at Stanford University and the University of Michigan by dedicated and thoughtful students are simply the portent of things to come in our personal lives.

JOHN FISCHER WAS FAR TOO MODEST

Not long ago, Mr. John Fischer, Fischer, John. "Easy Chair," Harper's Magazine, 239 (September, 1969), 12-22. proposed that existing college curricula be redesigned around "The Environment" and "Pollution," and I have the feeling that he was being easy on us. I am sure he was aware of many of the problems discussed here but proposed much less than he did so as not to startle us in our academic arrogance. As implied earlier, I do wish we had the time to discuss each pressing issue patiently and quietly, but such seems hardly the case. Therefore, rather than raise innumerable questions, which academicians tend to love because it affords them time to waste more time, I would like to propose the development of curricula and training programs within higher education which would produce graduates capable of working meaningfully in the following areas of urgent human concern.

I. Family level programs designed to counter the negative, potentially irreversible effects of living in grinding poverty. This need goes far beyond a graduate who thinks that Black is Beautiful or that Chicanos are really human beings or that Appalachian whites are an interesting lot. A recent book, Wilcox, Roger. The Psychological Consequences of Being a Black American. New York: John Wiley, 1971. enumerates a number of negative effects of being poor and black, which so many are, and these effects need to be honestly faced as problems desperately in need of solution.

Professor S.O. Roberts' study which appears in the book just cited showed that for one group of young girls living in poor and broken homes, there was an average decrease of 15 IQ points between the ages of five and ten. Such curricula would concern themselves with supportive programs to offset cognitive decay; Editorial Staff. "Nuturing Intelligence," Time, 99 (I) (January 3, 1972), 56-57. family level intervention programs to offset the social-personal decline in children of broken homes; and functional counseling for poverty area young marrieds regarding child rearing, education, etc. The goal here is to attempt to offset certain of the long-term effects of poverty and, hopefully, diminish the potential for the incorporation of the very poor into some form of caste typing.
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II. "The comprehension and utilization of governmental agencies" is a body of knowledge that needs to be gathered and passed along to our people, particularly the unfortunate. Our state and federal governments constitute a considerable resource which few understand or are capable of manipulating and utilizing appropriately. Also, unfortunately, many governmental agencies exhibit such arrogance and disdain for their various clienteles that often the services provided are hardly worth the discomfort. Professionals in areas such as these could function somewhat in the ombudsman role and exercise a bit of a humanizing influence upon the government agencies.

III. Aging. The urgency here is related to the increasingly rapid rate of change within society and the role of the elderly within such an evolving culture. The latest government estimates show that there are more than twenty million Americans who are sixty-five and older, with the number growing each year as a function of developments in life maintenance research and health procedures. The aged could easily become excellent candidates for one of the lower strata of a caste system since, by virtue of their generally fixed income and advanced age, they would not be seen as a very productive cultural group. We Americans have a frightening tendency to throw things away once they seem to have served their purpose, and it seems to matter little that some of those things are grandmothers.

IV. Leisure. The significance of this area lies in the fact that not only is technological development reducing the work week of those who labor but it is also increasing the life span of many others so that they are compelled to deal with the leisure demands of their retirement. Increasing leisure may, in fact, prove to be detrimental to our survival since it has been shown that men need to work, perhaps more urgently than the work needs to be done. The wealth of insight from Lorenz, Konrad. *On Aggression*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963 and Ardrey, Robert. *African Genesis*, New York: Atheneum Press, 1961, indicates that all life forms have their tasks and further that the essential integrity and maintenance of such organisms cannot be separated from their tasks. Since there is no particular reason to assume that man differs in this respect, our extended leisure may destroy us.

**TOWARD A BRIGHTER TOMORROW...?**

This essay is simply a plea for a variety of truly interdisciplinary curricula which will only make sense to the extent that they significantly resolve the more pressing issues concerning the quality of human life. The recent fashion of offering such majors as Social Sciences, Ethnic Studies, or Interpersonal Communications often achieves little more than the renaming and redistribution of tired old courses that strain toward a passe' relevance. Oddly enough, and thankfully, we do not need anything as rare or expensive as charismatic vision. We essentially have more than enough already; it is simply a case of visualizing the wholly urgent nature of what only appear to be remote problems. In the four months that I have been concerned with this paper, approximately 36,000,000 babies have been born into the world; the vast majority of them will arise in poverty, develop only minimally, and likewise die in poverty and very probably ignorance. Fabun, Don. *The Dynamics of Change*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967.

Though I might wish otherwise, I am not particularly optimistic about the prospect of American Higher Education rededicating its energies and brilliance to the improvement of the quality of human life. There is yet too much concern with publication rates, class size, tenure, teaching loads, and a deadening ego mania to imagine that our university laboratories and lecture halls will over flow with concern for the poor, or the aged, or the dehumanized. Thus, it may be that in some impending future when many are asked, "What does your father do?", they will compelled to answer, "Absolutely nothing." At such a conceivable juncture in human history as this, the unlikely but final horror in an ancient, honored maxim may everywhere descend: "Like father, like son."

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