

A Comparative Look at English, French and Soviet Education

A survey of French, British, and Soviet schools gives us insight into some of our own attainments and our own continuing problems.

AMONG THOSE who criticize the non-intellectual nature of American education there are a great many who themselves fail to do the necessary intellectual spadework. Their own work substantiates the view that a non-compulsive system of education such as the Americans enjoy can only work if people avail themselves fully of its opportunities. A free system provides the negative liberty of doing nothing as well as the positive liberty of working to the utmost. It is an unchallengeable criticism of education in the United States to say that the American people fail to put into it the kind of energy which made them world famous in all fields in the last two centuries. It is an equally unchallengeable criticism to say that those concerned with improvement of education, professionals and laymen alike, have failed to equip themselves adequately for this important task.

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It is time to recognize that the true study of education is as rigorous and as exacting as the study of any academic discipline. It requires firsthand acquaintance with the development of pedagogical thought from Plato to Dewey. It forces one to do ceaseless field work of visitation and observation of schools at their best and at their worst. Last but not least, it demands from one a perspective of comparative knowledge and experience. We must learn from the achievements and mistakes of other countries. It is in this last point, in particular, that the failure to learn the languages, to travel, and to read extensively has resulted in shallow generalizations and glib proposals to duplicate the illusory foreign panaceas.

There has been altogether too much distortion of educational data. The task of the present article is to reset such data side by side in comparative perspective. The main concern of the argument that follows is with the strength of the school programs in the three countries under discussion. But it is hoped to demonstrate that by definition the strength of any educational system emerges only after the back-

ground of possible weakness has been discussed and exposed.

Strengths and Weaknesses

It is also hoped that such discussion will illustrate one of the basic laws of comparative education. No educational system can be viewed out of context. The very words, strength and weakness, are themselves variables and have to be redefined for each culture and each school system. What is sauce for the goose may not be sauce for the gander. Hence, Americans seeking to transplant the strengths of foreign educational systems must be on guard against an undue projection of values. Many of the features which they now call strengths in foreign education are considered weaknesses by the very countries concerned. In reverse many of the weaknesses which are decried here are admiringly copied abroad as features that are worth teaching.

It is not merely an accident that on visiting a new American school recently, I was proudly shown the chemistry laboratory "which we are sure is as good as anything the Russians have," while two weeks later in a Moscow ten-year school I was equally proudly taken for a ride in a driver education car, the pupil behind the wheel and the instructor beside him glowing: "Now you can see that we are as *advanced* as you Americans."

One cannot dismiss this incident as simply an example of the blind Russian desire to *dognat' i peregnat'* (equal and overtake) the United States in everything. Even now, when driver education has become the whipping boy of American education, it would be interesting to ask a representative sample of Americans which they would *rather* have their children learn: to spell correctly or to

drive carefully? And if the answer is both, which *more*? A response to this would furnish an explanation of the present practice-oriented tenor of American education. It is hardly necessary to elaborate further the point that strengths of education can be viewed only in terms of specific needs and values of national cultures.

It would be better thus, at least at the start, to talk about similarities and differences rather than strengths and weaknesses between the United States and the three countries concerned. The educational systems of England, France and the Soviet Union are actually so different from one another that it is difficult to juxtapose them as a group to the United States. But there is one characteristic which all three share and in which they differ radically from this country. In the United States what is taught in the schools is in theory determined by the population as a whole, and in actual practice, by a very large fraction of the total population. By contrast, in England, France, and the Soviet Union, what is taught is set down by the educated *minority* of the nation. In these three countries, supported by old traditional culture, or by new theories of what the ideal society should be (both of which they have themselves developed) the men of intellect (broadly defined) formulate and enforce the content of education for all. In France, England and the Soviet Union advanced education confers not only learning but also prestige and power. In the field of determining what is to be taught at schools that power amounts to a virtual monopoly.

In the United States by contrast men of intellect only *participate* in the process of curriculum formation. They advise and persuade, and as such receive

considerable hearing, which fact they often fail to appreciate adequately. But they must share the power of actual determination of what is to be taught with people who often do not care for education in the same sense. Men in business, in labor or in local government, parents and pressure groups, share equal power but are often non-intellectual or militantly anti-intellectual in their attitudes. Most educated groups consider this a great weakness of American education and yearningly look to the European practices as a desirable solution.

On the other hand anyone who has studied the effects of the overdose of intellectual domination in European schools is likely to look upon the American model as the best democratic safeguard against cultural tyranny.

The estimate of the over-all strength of the European systems as against the American depends thus on one's attitude towards the monopoly of intellectuals in curriculum making. In Europe it results, for better or worse, in definite and inflexible programs of education. In England, France and the Soviet Union the content of the school curriculum reflects what intellectual men can do, like doing, and consider useful as preparation for college and for life. In these countries the curriculum with obvious variations and exceptions is almost uniformly academically oriented. The subjects taught are absolute criteria to which pupils are upgraded.

By contrast in the United States the subjects are made to yield before the character and interest of the people. The mixture of practical and academic offerings reflects the compromise between the intellectual and the non-intellectual groups within each respective community. Each party to the com-

promise forever attempts to improve its position and the resulting tensions have made a clear cut and stable educational policy difficult. But at least they have turned education with its virtues and faults into a faithful mirror of the nation. One approves of American education if one believes in people setting the standards for themselves. One does not if one believes standards to be above the people and in need of being interpreted for them by the few men of insight. In the latter case, it remains to choose the men who have insight. To this problem each European country professes to have found the best, although different, solution.

To say that the educational systems of England, France, and the U.S.S.R. are determined by an intellectual minority and therefore are intellectually oriented is all that can be said about their similarities. Teaching of definite and established subjects, largely by the lecture method, continues to be the main common educational feature of European education. But neither the social composition of the determining groups, nor the plans of study they formulate, nor the administrative machinery through which they enforce it, bear any marked resemblance to each other. A comparative review of these supplies three useful variants of cultural and social circumstances in which intellectually directed education has established itself.

Culture Générale

In France the educational administration is rigidly centralized and thus virtually in the hands of career *civil servants*. To be sure these civil servants, the directors of departments in the Ministry of Education, the inspectors, the rectors of the Academies, were once

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teachers or educational administrators at lower levels. But they no more identify with teachers than the superintendents of schools in the United States who are also recruited from the profession. Themselves the most successful products of the exacting and rigidly selective educational system, the French administrators are stubbornly dedicated to its maintenance and perpetuation. In their hands is a centralized machinery of control originated by the genius of Napoleon. It provides powers to legislate uniform curriculum. It gives life and death control over selection, salaries and promotion of teachers. It furnishes compelling legal supervision of the financial outlay even though school buildings are mostly financed from the funds of the local *communes*. Through that machinery professional men, to the almost total exclusion of the public, enforce a tough school program.

Even in primary schools French youngsters are given subjects designed to develop their intellectual capacities. Drawing or handicrafts, singing, gymnastics or recreation occupy only one-third of the time. In secondary schools, upon which program the curriculum of the private schools is also based, only about one-fifth of the total weekly time is dedicated to such subjects. The seven-year curriculum provides for a continuous study of French, one foreign language, history, geography, mathematics and physics. The available choices allow for optional Latin in the lower two grades and allow for substitution of a second modern language for Greek in the senior grades. Classical, modern,

science and economic streaming allows for some variety in the number of hours in a few subjects. Mathematics and sciences occupy on the average one-sixth of the time in the curriculum except in the upper three grades of the modern and science stream where they are studied roughly half the time. In this way, strictly circumscribed by the administration, the French schools serve the concept of *culture générale*.

The Soviet Curriculum

In the Soviet Union educational administration, with the exception of higher education, is not part of the all-union government. Nevertheless, party supervision has *de facto* placed it in the hands of major *political leaders*. In each republic, whether federal or autonomous, a separate Ministry of Education manages its own centralized school system. At the level of federal republics these systems are theoretically independent of each other, and are allowed to display some measure of free initiative. The Ministers of Education and the heads of county and town districts are selected overwhelmingly, however, from among Party members. A direct executive supervision of the Party over the schools is not seen or mentioned openly except for the presence of Pioneer or Komsomol organizers, who sometimes also double up as teachers. But the Party oriented personnel policy (which often drafts non-teachers for top educational posts) ensures the virtual identity of programs throughout the whole Soviet Union. All ministries simply copy the precedents established by the Ministry of the Russian Federation, the largest union republic, which alone maintains a policy-making Academy of Pedagogical Sciences.

As a result, although brought about

by indirect enforcement, the Soviet curriculum is substantially traditional and unified. Even in special ballet, music and art schools, in the schools for the handicapped, and in the evening schools for urban and rural youths strenuous attempts are made to achieve fully the prescribed ten-year school program. In the old curriculum that held unchallenged sway until 1955, children studied Russian language and literature and mathematics, first as the 3 R's and then as subjects, for the full ten years. They took history for seven years, geography and foreign language for six years, physics for five years, chemistry for four years, and even one year of astronomy. Mathematics and sciences occupied some 35 per cent of the time in the curriculum; subjects like singing, drawing and physical training only some ten per cent. Completely in the hands of political leaders, the Soviet system does not need the device of total administrative centralization to achieve its objectives. Those objectives, though in different ratios and for reasons different from the French, are also governed by the total acceptance of only one concept of *obshcheobrazovanie* (general education).

The English Program

In England, even though certain powers of the Ministry of Education are relentlessly growing, education is almost completely decentralized. Decisions about curricula are almost all in the hands of professional teachers. The Local Education Authorities submit to the Ministry of Education development plans for approval, observe the rules on teacher certification and can guide themselves by the Ministry negotiated "Burnham scale" of teacher salaries. In return they receive national funds which help to defray as much as one-half of their current

expenditures; they can also use professional and publication help from the Ministry's Inspectorate. But in matters of curriculum, methods and texts not only headmasters but teachers also are actually autonomous. England prefers to rely for its standards on university entrance requirements, the teachers subject associations and the compelling cultural traditions.

Hence, there is no uniform curriculum in England but only a uniform level of achievement. Even in the dominant grammar school, whether public or private, pupils though subjected to a purely college preparatory curriculum do find scope for specialization especially in the sixth form. But in spite of this atmosphere of freedom the curriculum does in fact vary very little. In primary education there was a period of enthusiastic progressive experimentation, but the enactment of the selective examination for the grammar school at the age of 11+ has tended to return at least the junior primary school (as against infant school) to the fold of formal training. In secondary grammar schools the study of English language and literature, Latin and one foreign language, geography, chemistry and physics has become firmly entrenched. The proportions of time spent on each of these subjects vary as does also the somewhat more generous proportion allotted to games, gymnastics, singing and fine arts. Only religion, taught according to the approved syllabus, is a compulsory subject for all schools. To Americans steeped in the tradition of freedom the English pattern of curriculum determination is obviously familiar. It results in a uniform liberal education for gentlemen; proposed, achieved by consensus, and maintained (without legislation) by the gentlemen themselves.

The comparative survey of European educational systems affords thus a unique opportunity for observing the same subject-centered methods of instruction in different administrative configurations. Americans who favor such a school program can draw upon comparative precedents tailored to their needs. As mentioned, their tradition of free local administration might cause them to lean most towards the British. But their passion for organizational efficiency might sway them towards the French. On the other hand their pride in science and in the common man's education links them most closely to the Russians.

Since one cannot copy from all three, it might be a relief to realize that one must doubt whether the concentration on subjects can be pronounced as an unqualified strength even for the systems that practice it. Two points militate against such a conclusion. First, the curriculum of each country must be set against the proportion of youth that is schooled. Secondly, as that proportion expands the mounting pressures for curriculum reform tend to weaken everywhere the exclusive traditional reliance on formal methods of instruction.

French and English Selectivity

The French success in teaching strict subject matter is based on the fact that extremely small proportions of the total age group are catered to by secondary education. Before the age of thirteen only one out of each ten children attending primary schools is selected to attend the *lycée* or *collège*. Between the ages of fourteen and nineteen only four youngsters out of each ten continue at schools and only two receive general secondary education. The education of most children ends at fourteen and its

quality is very much looked down upon by secondary schools.

Furthermore, the maintenance of rigid high standards is responsible for the very high attrition rate within the latter. About 45 per cent of all candidates for the first part of the final baccalaureate examination fail. Of those who are left only 60 per cent succeed in passing the second part a year or two later. The *grand concours* for the entrance to universities takes further toll. On the whole, of some half million children who are in school at thirteen years of age, a year before the compulsory school age ends, under ten per cent succeed in reaching the university. In view of such selectivity the successes of the French in teaching academic subjects are hardly surprising. They must be at any rate set against the tensions, over-work, frustration of rejects and above all the curious inability of French intellectuals to break through from the theoretical to the practical. Whatever the merits of French education, it is an unmixed blessing to no one.

The English standards, intellectually somewhat lower than the French, are a result of an early separation of potentially academically able children through the famous or infamous grammar school entrance examination. Only some half of all the English children in primary schools are admitted to or request the 11+ test. Of these only about one-half succeed in gaining admittance to the public or private grammar schools. Less than one-fifth of these reach the university. At the age of fourteen, a year before the compulsory school age ends, there are some half million children at school. Less than five per cent of these have a chance of reaching the university. Like France, England has a highly selective system of education.

In such systems the maintenance of set standards and formal methods of instruction presents no difficulties.

Russian Education for All

Only the Russians cater to a vastly larger and steadily expanding proportion of the youth of school age. In fact certain features of their system and certainly the direction it is taking bear a striking resemblance to the American heritage. At mid-century the Russians could fairly well substantiate their claim of having achieved seven-year education for all. Their ambition to secure ten-year education by 1960 will, except in major cities, take probably another quarter of a century to complete. In rough figures one out of three youths of the appropriate age group graduated from ten-year school last year (as against one out of two in the U.S.). But only one in ten entered a university or college (as against one in three in the U. S.).

To substantiate their stand on uniform secondary education for all the Russians have long claimed, not altogether unconvincingly, that all children, given the full attention in school and at home, can achieve success in a general curriculum, in spite of disparities of ability. But it cannot be a coincidence that as the range of its education expanded the formal content of the Soviet curriculum began evolving into practical directions. Doubts can also be expressed about the apparent success of the Soviet system in graduating over eighty per cent of pupils now in upper secondary schools. Prompting in classrooms, favorable grading by teachers who are blamed for their pupils' failure, extensive coaching for examinations, and above all frequent inability of Soviet students to relate what was learned to

outside practice (especially in foreign languages) were a few of the things observed that cast new light on the problem of education for all in academic subjects. Even if one agrees that all or most should learn academic subjects, the implementation of such a program creates as many new problems as it is intended to solve.

There is thus strong evidence to suggest that insistence on a stiff formal academic program can only maintain itself if coupled with selective recruitment. As each European country yields to pressure to extend its educational opportunities, its problems begin to resemble the difficulties American education has had to cope with. Of course, our system paid the heavy price of pioneering in education for all; other countries may, as the United States and Germany did when England invented and developed the railways, borrow the essence without copying the mistakes. Nevertheless, the critical educational literature in the countries affected begins to look rather like the American literature. On the one hand there is widespread comment about the less able who not only cannot fulfill but actually "debase" requirements. On the other, there are increasing and stormy pressures to reform the curriculum in the direction of more practical orientation.

Pressures for Reform

In England the 1944 legislation has brought the first tripartite legislation of "secondary education for all." The residuum of the school population not selected for grammar or technical stream had been placed in modern schools in which the curriculum was meant to be devised with the practical needs of the pupils in mind. A decade of this policy has ended with varying success. By and

large the failure of the teachers to adapt the curriculum to practice, their continuous hankering for and upgrading to the grammar schools has disenchanted many with the concept and has lent strength to two alternate proposals. On one side strong voices have urged the expansion of technical education. A system of such education crowned by national special skills colleges (such as, for instance, the National College of Horology) and by the now again urged university departments of science might challenge the supremacy of the grammar school. On the other hand the renewed advocacy of comprehensive schools is aiming at not only weakening but abolishing their separate existence. Grammar schools and the education for "clerks" which they foster are accused of being a danger to England's economic future. The government White Paper, in December 1958, commented on the 11+ examination in tones indicating an impending radical transformation of the educational system.

In France the last decade saw the creation, official adoption and submission to the National Assembly of the program of reform designed to break the supremacy of academic subjects. An early effort to start the secondary school students in progressively oriented *classes nouvelles* has brought, like the Modern School experiment, more disappointments than successes. But their successor, the pilot classes, is now reported to be spreading. New efforts, centered on the establishment of a full-scale technical baccalaureate, were expected to offer the general schools some lively competition. In addition, homework in primary schools has now been abolished. Twice the entrance and graduation examinations in secondary schools had to be readministered after a shocked out-

cry at their severity. The entrance examination is now gone to be replaced by pupils credits as the basis of selection. University entrance has now been made possible without a baccalaureate, after suitable private study or correspondence courses. The traditional work of French general schools is also being challenged from within.

In the U.S.S.R., most strongly affected by the swelling tide of students, no less than three new curriculum programs are being experimented with. First, already fifty per cent of schools in the Russian Federation are on a polytechnical program which abolished logic, reduced time for Russian, history, language and mathematics, and introduced instead driver education, workshop practice, practice in industry and next year will introduce home economics. Secondly, fifty experimental schools are now on the new eleven-year program which provides in the uppermost three grades for three days in school and three days at work in the factory or *kolkhoz*. The third program which considers the possibility of a three stream upper ten-year school with language, biology, and mathematics specialization, is in a blueprint stage and may reach fruition in 1959. In the universities, as advertised for the next academic year, eighty per cent of places will be reserved as priority to candidates with two years' work experience, military service, or graduation from technicum instead of ten-year school. The Party's November 1958 plan for eight-year secondary schools followed by work in industry and evening study shows that the Soviet Union once more is strikingly reversing itself and is adopting full scale features of practical education.

Thus the walls of one-sided academic secondary school training are crumbling

everywhere. In all countries as in the United States the danger now is not that the intellectual subjects will dominate but that they will be engulfed by the general holocaust. Whatever merit the monopolistic intellectual education may have exhibited belongs now to the past. The long-established curricula of France, England and Russia can hardly be cited as evidence of adaptability.

But if the curriculum in European countries is not their strength, what is? The answer is not far to seek. The merits of French, English and Russian schools are to be found in the undivided central focus which gives them in each case a distinct character.

Every educational system of Western culture shares certain common goals. All try to develop mind, body, civic pride, and moral uprightness. The peculiar difference of each system lies not in the values which it teaches but in the *priority* which it puts on them.

The heirs of the French Revolution set supreme value on the exercise of *intellect*. Clear, cold, analytical thinking, deep learning for its own sake, defiance of ready made and imposed systems of belief—these characteristics of French culture speak clearly from thousands of schoolbook pages. The emphasis on the culture, and brilliance of mind, and elegance, on things spiritual, permeate every facet of French education.

The English, on the other hand, concentrate on training *character*. The ideal of a gentleman, serene in moral certitude and uprightness, was born with the Puritan Revolution and has never lost its vitality. Civic responsibility, inner coherence and observance of things "done" and "not done" characterizes English schools.

Soviet education, again, emphasises social *cohesion*. The October Revolution

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has imbued the Russian people with the fear of hostility and a sense of isolation from the outside world. They responded by banding together, so vigorously as to put in peril the very individual welfare which the Revolution purported to defend. One cannot escape the overpowering feeling of unity in the Soviet schools.

The American people also had a Revolution and their own special educational goal—*individual development*. Our schools have concentrated on sparking in their pupils an urge towards continuous and boundless creativity. In this country it used not to matter what men studied so long as they dedicated themselves wholly to the task that absorbed them. It was this permissiveness that released hidden mental and manual energies in men who hardly suspected they had them. We would now do well to bring our Revolution back into our homes. It is through total dedication to one supreme ideal that the educational systems reviewed above reveal the soul of their nations at their best.

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