

Irrationalism and the New Reformism

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AMONG the ideas which may soon come to influence education most significantly, two stand out—both by way of gathering momentum, and by virtue of the changes they would bring to any and all institutions affected. The first of these ideas—or, more accurately, these sets of ideas—is what might be called irrationalism or, in its extreme form, anti-rationalism. The second constitutes a very special type of reformism, taking its character and flavor from the anti-rationalism which in part inspires it.

To assess the sort of impact these two interrelated ideas may have on schools, we must first examine their nature and form. Although an exhaustive attempt might fill a book, perhaps we can here look at two outstanding features of each of these sets of ideas: the circumscribing of reason's role and the expansion of the role of emotion, as represented in contemporary irrationalism; and the irrationalism and rejection of democratic process which mark the new reformism.

Anti-Rationalism

First, just what sort of anti-rationalism is present? Actually, it seems to constitute a broad trend, displaying a range of conviction with respect to the role of rationality in life.

It includes those disappointed heirs of the Enlightenment who have come to question whether reason and knowledge will ever yield the solutions we had hoped. And in more extreme form, the movement also encompasses those who no longer question but are convinced that for contemporary man, reason has become more bane than boon. A direct, frontal attack on reason has played a prominent part in many of the activities of the New Left, Black Militants, and student demonstrators across the nation. It is not merely that critics seem justified in charging these groups with anti-rationalism. The significant point is rather that so many have openly claimed anti-rationalism for themselves. For an overt rejection of logic, reason, and knowledge is one of the most frequent themes of these groups—even if its expression is often parenthetical and almost offhanded. Indeed, it is almost as if a rejection of the processes and products of reason has already become an unquestioned operating assumption for these groups. Thus, such rejection needs stating only in handling outsiders and their challenges.

On such occasions, one hears the message over and over again: "On the New

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Left, we're not so logical," proudly proclaims one young interviewee. And furthermore, "It is not possible to be logical when you're with us."¹ At the recent Princeton seminar held by the International Association for Cultural Freedom, observer Walter Goodman was struck by the frequency with which these groups expressed their suspicion toward reason.

This attitude went well beyond impatience with the tedium of such traditional practices as discussion, analysis, and weighing of alternatives. It was not that these were merely dull or unnecessary: They were downright undesirable. Moreover, the several representatives of the newer politics condemned repeatedly the "lack of passion" of the others gathered at Princeton. One put it hands down: "Cool reasonableness is . . . not preferable to a political hysteria."²

This introduces a second facet of anti-rationalism, which is really but the other side of the coin. For if reason, knowledge, and analysis are found wanting when it comes to choosing a program or deciding an issue, it is feeling and passion on which one should depend instead. Indeed, among this group, passionate conviction and involvement provide the very procedural ground for decision and choice—just as detachment, objectivity, and calm appraisal were once urged as the qualitative ground important to valid choosing and deciding. These latter, traditional qualities, suggest the present group, are in fact better calculated to becloud and invalidate choosing; for the yield of detached choice will surely lack the sort of "gut commitment" that provides the only legitimate warrant for acceptance and action.

A man may become intellectually convinced by objective experiment and demonstration that "Water boils at 212°F."—or cognitively informed by factual reports that numerous deaths from malnutrition are occurring daily in Biafra—but neither item is

¹ Quoted by Lionel Abel in: "Seven Heroes of the New Left." *New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 1968. pp. 30 and 129.

² Quoted by Walter Goodman in: "The Liberal Establishment Faces the Blacks, the Young, the New Left." *New York Times Magazine*, December 29, 1968. p. 30.

likely to rouse him to passionate relevant partisanship. And unless something evokes feeling in him, then it lacks "authenticity" for him, and he is just as well off not believing it at all. Without the crucial, sanctioning emotional quality, sheer knowledge or belief is meaningless and useless or worse: productive of inauthenticity or hypocrisy.

Intense emotion, caring, and passion stand then as contemporary irrationalism's cure for the ills of today. Yet not all the individuals and ideas comprising the growing irrationalist trend are as openly hostile to reason as are the youth groups and militants so far identified. There are proposals in many fields which do not involve *direct* assaults on reason and its efficacy or desirability—but which nevertheless lead to quite similar consequences. For the irrationalist, as well as the anti-rationalist, urges the substitution of feeling and emotion in approaching tasks we have been assigning to reason and knowledge. Explicit and implicit, the evidences and manifestations of this milder irrationalist tendency abound in various spheres, and from diverse sources.

The impressive popularity of Marshall McLuhan provides one kind of case in point, for McLuhan almost contemptuously dismisses the "linear," one-dimensional logic which has provided the model for the rationalist tradition. For him, such logic is simply obsolete and passé. And although as scientist and scholar McLuhan must keep one foot in the old-fashioned rationalist camp, both the method and style of his works reveal an increasingly familiar impatience with traditional ways of working out and supporting conclusions. The imagery in which he deals, and the often obscure connections and associations by which he proceeds from one idea to another, suggest a style of inquiry which has aptly been dubbed more psychedelic than scientific or rationalistic.

Indeed, in education itself—and not just among the youth protesting the Establishment—one finds a growing preoccupation with emotion, feeling, and affect among the most widely read newer books. As one interpreter observed, the education books of the 'Sixties differ markedly from those most

prominent a decade ago. The latter called for an "intellectual upgrading" within education; today's cry is instead for "humanizing" the schools, and the concern is with affective development, not cognitive.³

A remarkable recent addition to this literature bears the telling title *Education and Ecstasy*. Criticizing almost all education past and present for its omission of "the Dionysian factor," the author asks and answers the critical educational question this way:

What, then, is the purpose, the goal of education? A large part of the answer may well be what men of this civilization have longest feared and most desired: *the achievement of moments of ecstasy*. Not fun, not simply pleasure, as in the equation of Bentham and Mill, not the libido pleasure of Freud, but ecstasy, *ananda*, the ultimate delight.⁴

It is unfair to the author, *Look* editor George Leonard, to oversimplify his plan for achieving this goal. But encounter groups constitute a major and continuing method to be diffused and pursued in some form in most teaching and learning. And he also suggests that schools can learn much from such personalistically-oriented endeavors as the unusual Esalen Institute, with its program of "meditation, intensified inner imagery, basic encounter, sensory awareness, expressive physical movement and creative symbolic behavior." Criticizing the distorting bias of education as we have known it, the author suggests that today's schools typically produce "emotional imbeciles," "sensory ignoramuses," and "somatic dumbbells."

Mr. Leonard does not indulge in open anti-rationalism. There is no overt denigration of the cognitive nor denial to it of an important role, either in education or in living. But what we have seen does seem to place him squarely among the larger group who have concluded that we simply cannot ask of

³ Harold W. Sobel. "The New Wave of Educational Literature." *Phi Delta Kappan* 50(2): 109-11; October 1968.

⁴ All quotations are taken from *Education and Ecstasy*, by George B. Leonard, as it originally appeared in three installments of *Look*: "How School Stunts Your Child," 32(19): 31-34+, September 17, 1968; "Visiting Day 2001 A.D.," 32(20): 37-40+, October 1, 1968; and "The Future Now," 32(21): 57-60+, October 15, 1968.

reason and knowledge all that we of the 20th century have expected from them. And this adds up to a plea for an enlarged sphere and role for the irrational in man. Leonard obviously joins the ranks of those who want to pursue answers to life's major questions by consulting emotion in preference to reason. And his rationale is presumably quite similar to that previously mentioned: the demand for passionate involvement in the replies to those questions, and a continuously intense emotional engagement with life itself. "The future," he warns, "will very likely judge nothing less appropriate than detached, fragmented, unfeeling men."⁵

The New Reformism

Since he is also a bearer of the new reformism earlier mentioned, Mr. Leonard provides a good introduction to this second set of ideas which may also exert profound educational influence. Last year he promulgated "A New Liberal Manifesto" in which he explained why traditional liberalism "failed" and has become "irrelevant":

Many liberals suffered a disabling flaw. Their liberalism did not extend below their eyebrows. . . . they were liberals of doctrine, ideology and the intellect. . . .⁶

As this suggests, the heart of the new reformism is just that: heart. Its affinity with anti-rationalism is clear because it seeks to extend the general style and specific procedures of irrationalism to apply to socio-political issues and decisions. The new reformism stands as a recommendation to the effect that irrationalism provides the answers, not just for the individual's life style and choices; it also recommends the appropriate posture for nations, and the general means of working out our collective problems.

Within the new reformism, as among the anti-rationalists, there is a wide spectrum of opinion—all advocates displaying, however, a common tendency. We see it in its mildest and perhaps incipient form in such a program as the Mothers March for Peace—

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ George B. Leonard. "A New Liberal Manifesto." *Look* 32(11): 27; May 28, 1968.

which, in contrast to its contemporary organizations, seemed to represent nothing so much as the reflection of, and demand for, genuinely *emotional* response to the horrors of war. But the Mothers March was perhaps mere prologue, with its plea for attending the affective dimensions of problems inevitably intellectualized and abstracted when pursued as affairs of state. Subsequent reformists have demanded a far more prominent role for the affective. Witness again, for example, testimony at Princeton for political hysteria in preference to "cool reasonableness." It came, incidentally, not from a youngster, but a professor at Harvard.

This preoccupation with feeling, and the demand for continuous passionate engagement, seems to represent one feature of the new reformism's two-pronged ideological base. The second part consists in an almost wholesale rejection of our sociopolitical system—government, of course, but also other major institutions as well. Most important, what is rejected—rendering the new reformism actually far more revolutionary than reformist in character—are the procedural provisions regulating the way all particular decisions are made.

American theorists have gloried in the claim that our political system permits of and virtually even *institutionalizes* change—allowing for extensive alterations, while taking as its only constant or unalterable arrangements, the procedural: the broad outline, that is, of *how* we shall decide. Thus, it is doubly significant that this decision process itself is perhaps a major target of the new reformism.

This, it appears, is precisely what is at stake in "confrontation" politics, the program increasingly pursued by the new reformism. The strategy seems to be to force particular decisions directly, thus circumventing or reversing the legal processes by which the issues would otherwise be resolved.

There is nothing radically new, of course, in a minority's resort to direct action in attempting to wrest or assure its own rights as against those of a majority. What does seem relatively new, however, is the

extension of such measures to apply also in other situations, resulting in attempts to compel majority performance when minority rights are not primarily or prominently at issue. To cite several examples: the demand that Afro-American history courses be offered in schools can easily be read as an insistence on minority rights; the demand that such courses be made compulsory for all students is something else. While even opponents might be willing to understand the first demand as an assertion of minority rights, the second seems to represent a new construction of minority entitlement—and a construction it is hard to reconcile with a commitment to the majority's right to govern itself.

Similarly, the assertion of one's right to refuse to be drafted is one thing; a demonstration denying anyone admission to an induction center is another. Or again, the boycotting and picketing of a meeting is a time-honored privilege; its disruption to the point where it cannot occur at all has not been. (It is not that our history has been devoid of such attempts. What does seem new and qualitatively different, however, is, on the one hand, the morally righteous posture assumed by the perpetrators, and on the other, the tolerance which has met such efforts. It was, after all, not so many years ago that we associated such measures only with those "kooks" and sneaker-shod old ladies populating what was then described as a "lunatic fringe.")

Thus, the new reformism seems to advance a view that is antithetically opposed to traditional decision-making arrangements. It should be noted that the denunciations and rejections of what may loosely be called "democratic procedure" are not limited to the extravagances of a few, or the excesses of frenzied moments. The opposition to democratic processes is both frequent and predictable, because it is built right into the ideology which directs many of the new reformists. Both Herbert Marcuse, the philosopher-prophet of the New Left, and Frantz Fanon, the intellectual sire of Black Militancy, argue in effect that reform—pursued within the system and according to its rules—is simply

impossible.⁷ Significant reform requires systemic change tantamount to revolution. For in order to succeed at all, dissidents must reject the entire system, and with it, the ground rules which sustain and make it possible.

Role of Education

And what is education to make of all this? If anti-rationalism and the new reformism are the emerging ideologies they seem to be, what should be the posture of the schools with regard to the new *Weltanschauung*? In one sense, of course, the question comes after the fact—for schools in many metropolitan areas have already felt the effects of the new reformism. But whether or not we can control all of these effects, we can certainly question their desirability and the acceptability of the ideologies inspiring the events.

I am afraid I find little potentially positive contribution in that part of the new reformism seeking to scrap democratic processes. History has seen too many instances of ends which at some subsequent point in time are supposed to justify and exonerate whatever means have been used in their attainment. Irrespective of the forcefulness of the arguments of Marcuse and Fanon—and they are, indeed, forceful—I fear the abandonment of procedural democracy, because that may well reintroduce all the old-fashioned tyrannies democracy evolved to prevent.

If we scrap democracy's procedures for decision making, the only thing that remains to be seen is whether the ensuing despotism will prove benevolent or otherwise. — Unless, of course, the new reformists have devised an improved alternative, with new protections

⁷ Marcuse's case is generally to the effect that the all-powerful system has absorbed effective opposition, turning the very instruments and processes of dissent to its own advantage and support. Fanon's argument is that the condition existing between colonizer and native is total opposition or war. In consequence, it is a situation which cannot be discussed, compromised, adjudicated, or otherwise politically and peaceably resolved. Force is the only recourse. (Militants have rendered Fanon's work on colonial nations relevant, by likening the situation of Blacks in this country to that of the natives of a colonized state.)

and safeguards. And sadly, the chances are that they have not. For not only are their mentors silent on this point, but the followers seem not yet to have come to the question. It is precisely at this point that the two features of the new reformism considered here come together in ominous combination. For on the one hand we have the opponent of democracy's processes—the revolutionary who is willing to use whatever force is necessary to overthrow present institutions and procedural guarantees; and on the other hand, he also represents irrationalism—telling us, in effect, "I don't know what to substitute. We will destroy first—and only then decide what to build in its place."

Yet the irrationalism by itself may have real virtues. For insofar as the movement represents a recommendation to the effect that in our personal lives we pay greater heed to emotion, perhaps it is a message many of us need. And insofar as the new reformism represents the extension of the anti-rationalism to regulate our impersonal negotiations and interactions—among groups, institutions, and states—possibly this, too, is a message we should hear very attentively. For there may be few better hopes for ending war, poverty, and injustice than to bring to them the kind of feeling and resolve we would surely experience if those we loved were the victims. Surely in this sense, the anti-rationalism of contemporary reformism has much to offer.

More directly, a considerable part of the irrationalist message may have something important to say—and perhaps it is just the antidote for those of us who are least able to recognize it! For it is surely the case that the traditional liberal has been reared on the counsel that he should distrust his emotions. Indeed, much of what he was taught with respect to finding out, concluding, and deciding was designed precisely to the purpose of counteracting and compensating for his preferences and biases, and thus assuring they did not lead him away from truth and down false byways.

This, after all, is exactly what we in education have been up to as we have dedi-

cated ourselves to teaching children "how to think," or to "think critically," or to be "intelligent problem-solvers." We have adopted, and tried to adapt to all life's circumstances and demands, the methods of science—particularly as enunciated by John Dewey, who was, after all, a consummate rationalist with unlimited faith in the power of reason and knowledge to guide man and enhance his state.

Perhaps it is the case, then, as anti-rationalism contends, that we have vastly oversold ourselves on reason's promise, as well as on its pervasive relevance to all life's circumstances.

If this be so, what ought education to be and do? Hopefully, we can arrive at some proper "mix" of reason and emotion for man—in his life, and consequently in that part of equipping him for it that we call education.

It is not, of course, a new problem—for philosophy or for education. Yet it is surely one that acquires new urgency from the ideological currents examined here. And just as surely, to propose that we evolve some appropriate *mixture* of the intellectual and affective for man and his instruction is a rather weak solution. For not only is it no solution at all: It even fails to direct us in seeking one (or, indeed, recognizing one should we stumble upon it). How does one appropriately conduct the search: looking primarily to reason or to emotion as guide? With only a handful of exceptions, the Western philosophical tradition all the way from Plato to Dewey would have agreed on reason as the proper instrument. It is precisely because of the revolutionary character and impact of the ideas examined here that we no longer enjoy such agreement. □

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