

## Democratic Education

Democratic education, says Aristotle, ought to mean, not the education which democrats like, but the education which will preserve democracy. Until we have realized that the two things do not necessarily go together we cannot think clearly about education.

For example, an education which gave the able and diligent boys no advantage over the stupid and idle ones, would be in one sense democratic. It would be egalitarian and democrats like equality. The caucus-race in *Alice*, where all the competitors won and all got prizes, was a "democratic" race: like the Garter it tolerated no nonsense about merit.<sup>1</sup> Such total egalitarianism in education has not yet been openly recommended. But a movement in that direction begins to appear. It can be seen in the growing demand that subjects which some boys do very much better than others should not be compulsory. Yesterday it was Latin; today, as I see from a letter in one of the papers, it is Mathematics. Both these subjects give an "unfair advantage" to boys of a certain type. To abolish that advantage is therefore in one sense democratic.

But of course there is no reason for stopping with the abolition of these two compulsions. To be consistent we must

<sup>1</sup> The Order of the Garter, instituted by King Edward III in 1344, is the highest order of knighthood. Lewis had in mind the comment made by Lord Melbourne (1779-1848) about the Order: "I like the Garter; there is no damned merit in it."

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go further. We must also abolish *all* compulsory subjects; and we must make the curriculum so wide that "every boy will get a chance at something". Even the boy who can't or won't learn his alphabet can be praised and petted for *something* — handicrafts or gymnastics, moral leadership or deportment, citizenship or the care of guinea-pigs, "hobbies" or musical appreciation — anything he likes. Then no boy, and no boy's parents, need feel inferior.

An education on those lines will be pleasing to democratic feelings. It will have repaired the inequalities of nature. But it is quite another question whether it will breed a democratic nation which can survive, or even one whose survival is desirable.

The improbability that a nation thus educated could survive need not be laboured. Obviously it can escape destruction only if its rivals and enemies are so obliging as to adopt the same system. A nation of dunces can be safe only in a world of dunces. But the question of desirability is more interesting.

The demand for equality has two sources; one of them is among the noblest, the other is the basest, of human emotions. The noble source is the desire for fair play. But the other source is the hatred of superiority. At the present moment it would be very unrealistic to overlook the importance of the latter. There is in all men a tendency (only corrigible by good training from without and persistent moral effort from within) to resent the existence of what is stronger, subtler or better than themselves. In uncorrected and brutal men this hardens into an implacable and disinterested hatred for every kind of excellence. The vocabulary of a period tells tales. There is reason to be alarmed at the immense vogue today of such words as "high-brow", "up-stage", "old school tie", "academic", "smug", and "complacent". These words, as used today, are sores: one feels the poison throbbing in them.

The kind of "democratic" education which is already looming ahead is bad because it endeavours to propitiate evil passions, to appease envy. There are two reasons for not attempting this. In the first place, you will not succeed. Envy is insatiable. The more you concede to it the more it will demand. No attitude of humility which you can possibly adopt will propitiate a man with an inferiority complex. In the second place, you are trying to introduce equality where equality is fatal.

Equality (outside mathematics) is a purely social conception. It applies to man as a political and economic animal. It has no place in the world of the mind. Beauty is not democratic; she reveals herself more to the few than to the many, more to the persistent and disciplined seekers than to the careless. Virtue is not democratic; she is achieved by those who pursue her more hotly than most men. Truth is not democratic; she demands special talents and special industry in those to whom she gives her favours. Political democracy is doomed if it tries to extend its demand for equality into these higher spheres. Ethical, intellectual, or aesthetic democracy is death.

A truly democratic education – one which will preserve democracy – must be, in its own field, ruthlessly aristocratic, shamelessly "high-brow". In drawing up its curriculum it should always have chiefly in view the interests of the boy who wants to know and who can know. (With very few exceptions they are the same boy. The stupid boy, nearly always, is the boy who does not *want* to know.) It must, in a certain sense, subordinate the interests of the many to those of the few, and it must subordinate the school to the university. Only thus can it be a nursery of those first-class intellects without which neither a democracy nor any other State can thrive.

"And what", you ask, "about the dull boy? What about our Tommy, who is so highly strung and doesn't like doing sums

and grammar? Is he to be brutally sacrificed to other people's sons?" I answer: dear Madam, you quite misunderstand Tommy's real wishes and real interests. It is the "aristocratic" system which will really give Tommy what he wants. If you let me have my way, Tommy will gravitate very comfortably to the bottom of the form; and there he will sit at the back of the room chewing caramels and conversing *sotto voce* with his peers, occasionally ragging and occasionally getting punished, and all the time imbibing that playfully intransigent attitude to authority which is our chief protection against England's becoming a servile State. When he grows up he will not be a Porson;<sup>1</sup> but the world will still have room for a great many more Tommies than Porsons. There are dozens of jobs (much better paid than the intellectual ones) in which he can be very useful and very happy. And one priceless benefit he will enjoy: he will know he's not clever. The distinction between him and the great brains will have been clear to him ever since, in the playground, he punched the heads containing those great brains. He will have a certain, half amused respect for them. He will cheerfully admit that, though he could knock spots off them on the golf links, they know and do what he cannot. He will be a pillar of democracy. He will allow just the right amount of rope to those clever ones.

But what you want to do is to take away from Tommy that whole free, private life as part of the everlasting opposition which is his whole desire. You have already robbed him of all real play by making games compulsory. Must you meddle further? When (during a Latin lesson really intended for his

<sup>1</sup> Richard Porson (1759–1808), son of the parish clerk at East Ruston, near North Walsham, showed extraordinary memory when a boy, and by the help of various protectors he was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1792 he became Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge.

better) he is contentedly whittling a piece of wood into a boat under the desk, must you come in to discover a "talent" and pack him off to the woodcarving class, so that what hitherto was fun must become one more lesson? Do you think he will thank you? Half the charm of carving the boat lay in the fact that it involved a resistance to authority. Must you take that pleasure — a pleasure without which no true democracy can exist — away from him? Give him marks for his hobby, officialize it, finally fool the poor boy into the belief that what he is doing is just as clever "in its own way" as real work? What do you think will come of it? When he gets out into the real world he is bound to discover the truth. He may be disappointed. Because you have turned this simple, wholesome creature into a coxcomb, he will resent those inferiorities which (but for you) would not have irked him at all. A mild pleasure in ragging, a determination not to be much interfered with, is a valuable brake on reckless planning and a valuable curb on the meddlesomeness of minor officials: envy, bleating "I'm as good as you", is the hotbed of Fascism. You are going about to take away the one and foment the other. Democracy demands that little men should not take big ones too seriously; it dies when it is full of little men who think they are big themselves.

## *A Dream*

I still think (with all respect to the Freudians) that it was the concourse of irritations during the day which was responsible for my dream.

The day had begun badly with a letter from L. about his married sister. L.'s sister is going to have a baby in a few months; her first, and that at an age which causes some anxiety. And according to L. the state of the law — if "law" is still the right word for it — is that his sister can get some domestic help only if she takes a job. She may try to nurse and care for her child provided she shoulders a burden of housework which will prevent her from doing so or kill her in the doing: or alternatively, she can get some help with the housework provided she herself takes a job which forces her to neglect the child.

I sat down to write a letter to L. I pointed out to him that of course his sister's case was very bad, but what could he expect? We were in the midst of a life and death struggle. The women who might have helped his sister had all been diverted to even more necessary work. I had just got thus far when the noise outside my window became so loud that I jumped up to see what it was.

It was the W.A.A.F.<sup>1</sup> It was the W.A.A.F., not using typewriters, nor mops, nor buckets, nor saucepans, nor pot-brushes, but holding a ceremonial parade. They had a

<sup>1</sup> Women's Auxilliary Air Force.