

CIVIC EDUCATION FOR A DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC

Notes ~~of~~ talk

~~Speech~~ to Doctoral Club December 8, 1955)

I envisioned at first M.D.s and pictured myself getting out of it a free tonsillectomy, which at moments like this I believe I needed ever since I was ten years old. Everyone has his own reasons to explain why he hasn't gotten ahead in the world. Of course, when I learned that the doctors in question were in Education, I changed my train of thought immediately: My concern became not whether I could lose my tonsils, but whether I might lose my mind. For a moment I wasn't sure at all what prompted their interest in my opinions. Could they have possibly wanted to hear what I think about teachers' colleges - - and that on a full stomach? Finally it occurred to me that what they had in mind was my special status regarding children. Apparently I could qualify to face such a distinguished group because my knowledge of education extended into the cradle more times than I care to think or because, just as you might listen patiently to some benefactor who has just given you a new building, you might listen with equal patience to one who was filling the building for you.

My mind was at rest then, for I knew that I could communicate with you by example. I can offer you my own experience - the simplest and most convincing form of communication. It was so well used by Senator Reynolds of North Carolina the time when he was asked to address an increasingly unruly and intemperate male student body at the University of Virginia. They had, it must be admitted, taken to excessive drinking and only the intervention of a respectful outside figure would be expected to stem the tide of spirits. Keenly aware of his difficult obligation, the Senator sought to convey his moral lesson by the most direct and simple means.

"I have been invited to lecture you gentlemen on the benefits of temperance," he declared, "and I know of no better way to convey them to you than by reciting the personal example of my daily life. When I awaken in the morning to face the day, I take no more than a small Bourbon whiskey as an eye opener. And before I shave, I pour myself a tumbler of spirits to steady my hand. Afterwards, when I sit down to breakfast,

three fingers of whiskey serve as an appetizer. But then, mind you, young gentlemen, away with the stuff until after breakfast."

My example in coping with numbers of children in the household is equally succinct and enlightening. I find it necessary to rise at an early hour—the crack of dawn is my usual signal. I turn on the furnace. I uncork the bottle of whiskey and place an empty tumbler beside it. I shave and cook my breakfast stealthily and quickly, so that when the first young cry shatters the peace of the household, I am already departed. The whiskey and tumbler are for my wife.

Then I go to my office where I can think intelligently and undisturbed about such problems as how education can create a democratic public. It is for such sweet sessions of silent thought that I am able to offer you some advice on that subject.

My essential view is that we should consider ourselves lucky to have a public, considering the morbidity rate of publics in modern history, and should be fairly astonished when our public shows signs of being democratic.

The public is, to quote my favorite philosopher, John Dewey, a collective perception of consequences of behaviors not directly affecting the perceivers. A democratic public is one that perceives consequences correctly. The first event — the existence of a public — is exceedingly rare in history save by limiting the particular public in question socially and territorially to the circumference of a tribe or small city state. There was something of an empirical public of Athens, of Rome, of Florence, of Switzerland, and England. The American and French revolutionaries, and their socialist and fascist offshoots strove mightily to establish a physical public of the masses. A democratic public has probably never existed. It can never come save through planned intelligence, utilizing all the techniques of social science. This was Dewey's greatest contribution often misunderstood even by his followers. As Marx once said that he himself was not a Marxist, Dewey could say that he was not of the Dewey School. To quote him again: "The problems of the public is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion." He means by these things not Speech 100 or Journalism 160, but a total restructuring of intelligence and operation in social affairs.

Let us see what evidence we have regarding the nature of the American public today.

To what extent is it really a public? Afterwards we can ask whether it can be a democratic public. Then finally we can inquire whether the school can build a democratic public.

The American public today is small. A great many people are not even conscious of being part of it. When Dr. Samuel Stouffer's interviewers recently asked a sample of the national population what kind of things they worried about most, 10 % said they had no worries. Practically everyone else cited health and other private worries. 10% worried about public affairs along with their other anxieties. And if they are conscious of it they may not be at all informed regarding it. The studies of Hyman and Sheatsley reveal this. A sample based on 90 % registration in the Minneapolis is suggestive of the lack of information. 98 % knew the Governor; About 70 % their Senators; 8 % their state senator and 7% and 4 % the two State assemblymen from the district.

The informed (in the bare sense) are several times more numerous than the active. Not long ago, after a few calculations, I announced that the number of active citizens in the USA was about the same as the number of active criminals. A few days ago, the FBI supplied me with a concrete index. It said that one out of seventeen Americans had been fingerprinted at some time on suspicion of crime. Every study of political activity that has been made would place the number of active citizens around one in thirty-five. You needn't look around uneasily at your neighbors. The crime rate and activity rates relate largely to different parts of the population. But sometimes people in education-to judge the prose of the critics of American education-are numbered among the criminals.

Let me describe only one study of the extent of the active public. The survey of S.C. Co. Dems. Precinct Captains, shows most of them activated by social not activist considerations.

We conclude then that the public is only vaguely formed. It is uninformed; it is inactive; it is ineffectual--all when measured against our original definition of public as the collective perception of the consequences of distantly related behavior. We do not even have the elemental bases in modern society for a democratic public. For a democratic public means a public that has a correct

As educators you will be especially interested in knowing that the percentage of participation does not apparently increase when tests of participation in school affairs are used rather than tests of general political participation.

The active are often ineffectual. Kefauver hearings on Crime aroused great indignation. A New York City Study found that 51 % of the 260 sampled respondents were emotionally aroused. 39 % were interested and favorable to the Hearings. 10 % were cynical. There was unanimous concern, a rare and evanescent political phenomenon. But responses were varied. 33 % had diffuse unrelated emotions (futility). 20 % had power fantasies (I felt like...). 20 % rejected active roles because too busy or no time. 25 % had constructive thoughts (i.e. were geared to the system of responsive government). And behaviors were more disappointing. 3 % talked to people on a lower deference level. 81 % talked to people on an equal deference level. 10 % did nothing at all. 5 % talked to people on higher deference levels . 6 % wired or wrote Federal officials. 1 % wrote the Mayor, 1 % the governor. Only 13 % of the total did something to influence the condition.

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That point brings us to an appraisal of who can do what to create a democratic public. And I nominate the educators of the country, especially the primary and secondary school educators.

The trouble with the public can be reduced to 1) the defective displacement of childhood in the New World. The ego can be stretched to incorporate several levels, but only in childhood. And throughout, all levels are needed. 2) Consistent and habitual displacements. More routine activities are needed at all levels/ This too can be done only in childhood. 3) Meaningless activity. Inattention to the main activities. Training to remedy this is required in childhood.

These problems all have a familiar ring. They are all major problems of the schools of America: isolation from the real world and its levels of problems; inconsistency and volatility of effort; meaningless activities, want of priorities.

I am only repeating what Plato said over 2000 years ago when I say that education is the system of political wisdom and justice; a rehearsal of statecraft; a prediction of the future of politics.

So we must allocate the responsibilities and it falls upon you and us. And we must prescribe the method and the cure must fit the disease/ We need awareness at all levels. We need education in creative thinking and action; problem-solving, not to take a position on temporary or non-fundamental issues; that can be called propaganda in education, but attention to the occurrence of important events, how to inquire into them, how to manage them and turn them into to good effect.

The position is midway incites practical controversiality between the vacuous school, the political party cell. It will still receive its attacks, its blows, and its name calling. But here every man can be his own hero. DAMN THE TORPEDOES, FULL SPEED AHEAD.

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