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A European View of American Education

FRANK M. SNOWDEN, JR.

THE EXTENT of the present spirited debate on American education raises the question as to whether anything of significance can be added to the controversy. The obvious challenge to our educational institutions, however, suggests that we should overlook nothing that may be of value in the re-examination of our educational philosophy and practice.

Numerous appraisals of our educational system make comparisons with or references to European education. One American professor, for example, observes that "it is the rare American high school that is the equal or the equivalent of the European secondary school" and that "as an educational process, no American university is the equal of its European competitors. . . ." Another educator, however, reports that European countries feel dissatisfaction with their school systems and look with envy on the United States. Acrimony appears in some discussions which often regard mere references to European methods as a desire to abandon democratic concepts and as the advocacy of an aristocratic education for the few.

I

But what does the European himself have to say? None of the current discussions in the United States, in my judgment, has made sufficient use of

important European observations on our educational pattern.

Why is Europe looking at our educational institutions? Analyzing American life, of course, is an ancient European tradition. Recent interest in American education, however, derives from a desire to examine our experiment in educating a whole people for the light that it may throw on the improvement of education abroad. For, since the war, European countries have become increasingly aware that many of their problems are similar to those which have confronted Americans in the evolution of their educational credo. What are the reasons for American alterations of European traditions? To what extent can Europe profit from American experience? What is to be avoided? These are some European concerns.

Although it is difficult to define a single European view of American education, many similar views are to be found everywhere. As Cultural Attaché of the American Embassy in Rome, I had frequent occasion to study the foreign press and to follow university discussions in many European countries, and, hence, to become acquainted with the current picture of American education as seen through European eyes. While in Italy, I attended a conference which reviewed critically fundamental educational problems of that country by

comparing the goals and methods of the American and Italian educational systems. The stated purpose of that conference was not to establish the superiority or inferiority of either system, nor to recommend that the educational pattern of one country be adopted by the other. The hope was rather, through the comparative method, to reappraise and to improve the Italian system. This same interest in American education I have found among European schoolmen, whether Polish or Belgian, Yugoslav or Dutch. It is in a similar spirit that I offer certain European observations on American education. For these reflections provide an opportunity for us to see ourselves as seen by others and to deepen the understanding of the articles of our educational faith.

The American doctrine of equality of educational opportunity for all children is often pointed to abroad as one of our most significant goals. The consequences of this doctrine are translated into statistics which contrast the American secondary enrollment of approximately 75% of the 16 and 17 year-olds in full-time education with a corresponding figure of 20% in Europe; and an American college enrollment of about 30% of youth from 18 to 20 with a European average of approximately 10% in the same group.

European educators note that general education for a large proportion of students between the ages of 16 and 20 is not offered on the European continent. Some explain that the European economy cannot afford education on such a scale. Others maintain that their curricula by concentrating on fundamen-

tals at the early primary and secondary stages accomplish the essentials of general education in a shorter time than we in the United States. There are also those, however, concerned with the possible loss in potential which may derive from a system which has traditionally required children to make important educational decisions at age eleven. Hence, in some European circles a re-examination of the educational structure is being undertaken. And, in this connection the American estimate of youth considered capable of pursuing higher education with profit has been cited as a challenge.*

Although our philosophy which calls for extensive availability and equality of educational opportunity is frequently admired abroad, serious doubt is frequently expressed as to whether, in a structure so overwhelmed by numbers, we can and are requiring the kind and quality of education required for the able student. One criticism expresses this view in these words: "It is a question of knowing if democracy is to be ruled by those standing on the bottom or those on the top and if it is to create a force to prevent those who tend to go to the top from being weighted down by those able only to stand on the bottom. In other words, the issue is if democracy is to walk at the pace of the last soldier or to create an advanced platoon. The American tendency of the last 30 years has been to cater to the masses, to lag behind

* The report of President Truman's Commission on Higher Education estimated that approximately 49% of American youth have the intellectual capacity to pursue with profit 14 years of schooling and that 32% have the capacity to finish college and university.

the most stupid, and to care especially for those with no intelligence, weak memories, and no imagination."

Another view recognizes the problems posed by our system and states that by a decision which has sacrificed the capable instead of the poor students, we have chosen a solution which provides a significant exemplar of faith in the value of the individual. A proponent of this opinion comments in these words: "To sacrifice the weak or the strong, the least endowed or the highly endowed?—This is the dilemma of all school organizations. The American school has accepted the second alternative. This solution, however, responds to the most genuine spirit of Christian faith and finds support in the results of modern psychology which show that the age of adolescence is par excellence the age of surprises, of unforeseen transformations and adaptations. . . . I am convinced that this school . . . gives us in reality one of the most eloquent lessons of idealism and of faith in the potentialities of the human personality."

In the case of the traditional opposition of "elite" and "mass" education, some Europeans, like some Americans, assume that the only choice is an *either-or* proposition. But Europeans acquainted with our current programs for able and gifted students see in these efforts important evidence that the choice is not necessarily a question of electing to educate a few people exceedingly well *or* to educate a large number of people less well but that it is possible and desirable to do both. Recent American concern as to the education of students of unusual ability and our continuing inter-

est in the average student emphasize for many Europeans the obligation of modern education to educate everybody as much as everybody can be educated, some much more, and some much less than others.

II

Comments on particulars of the American secondary school concentrate especially on the orientation and the curriculum.

As to the organization of our early educational structure, European observers see advantages in our system. American secondary education, it is noted abroad, does much to overcome prejudice and privilege by bringing together, except in certain areas of the South, for the first nine or twelve years of schooling, youths of profoundly different ethnic, religious, and cultural origins. Such a practice, in the opinion of some foreign observers, also provides a basis, lacking in many parts of Europe, for the development of mutual understanding between different cultural and occupational groups. The gap which exists on the continent between members of different social groups, according to this argument, is not found in the United States, where the public secondary school has given life to a common language. The civic orientation of American secondary education, which Europeans often consider as the real goal of our high schools, is regarded by many as a successful achievement, with aspects worthy of emulation.

Our extra-curricular activities evoke considerable comment—both favorable and unfavorable. Many Europeans con-

sider the time spent on extra-curricular activities in our schools, the energy devoted to sports and to the development of majorettes and cheerleaders, and the hours spent traveling from city to city for inter-scholastic competitions as needless distractions to the primary function of education and as efforts which could be more profitably dedicated to basic academic disciplines. Others, however, approve of our concern with such activities, provided that they are kept in proper perspective. Proponents of such a view believe that the frequent lack of interest in what European students do outside the academic curricula creates a grave lacuna and complain that, unless a European student models himself on a traditional, idealized type, little credit is given for his ideas.

What are frequent European observations on the aim and content of the academic programs of our secondary schools? The American school appears to many foreign observers as oriented in the present with an emphasis on participation in society. A contrast is made between the American as a school of action; the European, a school of thought. The European pupil is evaluated as a boy who reflects and in whom the capacity for logical reasoning is appreciated. The American pupil, on the other hand, is judged as to his capacity for action, and for establishing group-relations.

American education, according to other foreign appraisals, is not an education of values, but of practical interests, not a school for developing intellectual maturity but an institution which

diverts education from a cultural undertaking into mere social adaptation to the American kaleidoscope. The student is allowed an excessive liberty in the choice of his subjects, and, though advised by a counselor, in the final analysis is permitted to judge for himself what is the best combination of subjects. With the resulting disordered fragments, it is argued, the student does not learn how to think and is unable to assess the present from a broad and detached perspective.

Although there are those who see virtue in our system which makes possible a greater latitude in choice of subjects at a time when pupils are discovering their interests and abilities, the wide range of electives permitted to American students seems a curious paradox. We require pupils to remain in school at least until the age of sixteen but do not determine sufficiently what studies should be followed. As a result American students do what students would do anywhere in the world—they select what is easy; they avoid languages, sciences, and mathematics. The consequences of the latitude permitted American secondary students are illustrated abroad by citing, for example, our frequent high school pattern of a single foreign language studied for two years only.

The American secondary school, then, according to certain European commentators, has a decidedly social character, whereas, the European has an emphasis largely cultural. The former is interested, first of all, in forming the citizen, the social being; the latter aims at cultural enrichment of the individual and the training of the mind. Neither is

completely sufficient, conclude others who add that perhaps the school of the future ought to achieve a compromise between the two tendencies—a compromise in which the Old World renounces certain aspects of its tradition and the New World includes more of the values expressed in European educational philosophy.

The most frequently-voiced criticism of our secondary education is that we require too little academically of our students and waste too much time and energy during the first twelve years of schooling. Europeans, it is obvious, are puzzled by the curriculum offered especially to many of our talented secondary youth. Boys under ten in Europe, it is pointed out, devote more hours to study than many American high school students at the age of seventeen. A comparison of textbooks used by eight- and nine-year-olds in Europe and the United States observed that European boys would be astonished by questions such as: "North, East, West, and South are points of the compass. Two other points are N.W. and S.W. Give the names of two other compass points" or "The heart pumps (1) water, (2) air, (3) blood." The practice which enables a student to "check," "circle," or "match" his way out of a course, often without ever having written a complete sentence, to say nothing of a paragraph, is noted in European comments on our courses in remedial and freshman English, the equivalent of which is unheard of in Europe for students of the age of our college freshmen.

Foreign judgments concerning our

elementary and secondary schools, it has been pointed out, include severe strictures, reflected also in certain observations on the college. There are those, for example, who doubt whether the American college student can ever recover from the lack of discipline and perspective which he failed to receive in secondary school. Others wonder how supposedly mature students of college age can tolerate either elementary work in languages and mathematics offered only in European secondary schools or requirements such as quizzes, term papers and frequent examinations.

III

A commentary on the development of American college freshmen will serve as a transition to foreign observations on American higher education. "With few exceptions," notes an Italian professor with teaching experience in the United States, "the first year students in American colleges are so ignorant and so defective in general culture that college teachers can only begin with ABC's and impart a rather elementary training. But it is marvelous what they succeed in doing after a few years of intensive work. The student who arrives at college ignorant of everything in the field of letters, languages, and history after four years has received an intensive instruction in these and other fields that is not at all inferior to that imparted in our universities—and it is more varied and modern."

The observation of the Italian professor, to a greater extent than other views on the American college, reveals

an awareness of certain differences between the philosophy of the continental and the American systems not always sufficiently understood abroad. According to one European argument, the American college exists only because of inadequate high school training. This is the reason, the argument continues, that the graduate of the European elementary-secondary school, after twelve or thirteen years of schooling, has sufficient preparation for admission to the junior year of an American college.

An increasing number of commentators, however, point out that although European students in preparatory schools have covered certain academic disciplines more thoroughly than many of their American opposites, the European yardstick can not be fairly used in measuring the American student. For the American pattern, by postponing early specialization and by combining general and specialized studies, often even to the senior year in college, is pursuing a different method of preparation, based on a different philosophy. The adoption of this philosophy, these observers add, allows a student a longer period in which to explore his academic interests and abilities and enables him perhaps to make a more mature decision as to his specialization. This prolongation of a period for general studies is of particular interest to those Europeans who have been concerned about increasing the number of university students from impoverished social and cultural backgrounds.

By devoting more time than European institutions to a broad, general ed-

ucation and by carrying on general and specialized studies simultaneously, the one complementing the other, the liberal arts college, according to one European view, is perhaps following a wise course. For in the end, our specialists, whose training in the academic disciplines at the end of high school has not been so intensive as the European's, have an excellent preparation. And, in addition, some Europeans are asking if the American specialist as *specialist* may not have advantages in being able to view his specialty with a broader perspective and as *citizen* may not be better prepared for his obligations as an active, responsible member of a modern, democratic society.

Europeans, then, note with interest the fact that, at an age when their students are already specializing, the American college student is required to follow a program of general education. Although Europeans maintain that more could be demanded academically of American students in the secondary school, it is the belief of many that the American system which requires students at college age (i.e., the equivalent of European university students) to follow programs of general education has much to commend it. In fact, I have found that many Europeans consider our general education in certain respects one of our most important contributions to Western educational thought. European university students, even though they have followed rigorous secondary curricula, it is pointed out, could profit from many of our recent practices in general education. Even in the field of

the humanities in which there has been a strong tradition in Europe, it is emphasized, students could derive much from some of our recent approaches to the humanities at the college level. European educators applaud our increased concern about modifying our traditional emphasis on the experience of the West in programs for the non-specialist.

The availability of opportunities for higher education in America not only in the traditional academic year but also in summer and evening schools as well as the goal of free public education through fourteen years of schooling, accentuates for many Europeans the importance and urgency of their considering methods of drawing their university students from broader segments of the population and of changing a system which, in the judgment of many, still includes too few students from lower economic levels.

Europeans comment favorably upon the American diversity of effort in higher education, the constant evaluation of curricula, the provision of educational opportunities by agencies other than the state, and the existence of public and private education side by side. Such a system, it is pointed out, makes possible diversity, flexibility, and experimentation more readily than under a centralized national system.

In the area of student-professor relationships American practices suggest to a number of educators abroad the need for them to increase contacts between students and professors and to provide more opportunities for exchange of ideas. When professors live far from the

universities in which they teach and concentrate lectures into the brief periods of their visits, they point out, opportunities for informal discussions are too few. Wide use of the lecture-system, many feel, results in *ex cathedra* instruction and in the reluctance of students and assistants to express their own ideas and disagreements. In the reconsideration of the student-professor relationship, therefore, American practice is being examined.

Current European evaluations, we have seen, are not, nor should they be, wholly laudatory. Neither are they so one-sided as many would have us believe. The European picture, however, includes penetrating observations on certain aspects of our educational structure which have long been a source of concern to American educators. Foreign and American systems have developed in response to a variety of different conditions. These systems have quite different outlooks which reflect different social histories. Europe may not offer the type of program many Americans will want to follow but acceptance of this fact does not mean that we should close our eyes to what responsible educators in other countries have to say. We can learn from others just as other can learn from us. The critical comments of our European friends, in my judgment, are significant additions to a tradition of observations on American life and culture which provide an important service to Americans by enabling us to see ourselves more clearly—both the shortcomings and virtues of our educational system.