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EDUCATION AND THE MODERN STATE

By Anthony O'Hear

I. Introduction: Listening to the Dead

One of the most extraordinary passages in modern literature is that presented to us by Ezra Pound as his *First Canto.*[1] Indeed, as the start of what eventually became the very backbone of twentieth-century poetry (Pound's *Cantos*), strict chronology aside, there may be some argument for seeing his first canto as a kind of manifesto for what has come to be known as modernist literature, that which has come to be associated with the writings of T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and Pound himself around the time of World War I. The manifesto suggests that we can only retrieve the wholeness our civilization has lost by re-connecting with our past, and thereby feeling things anew—the very opposite of what the modernists saw as the cliché-ridden and orotund poetry prevalent prior to World War I.

What Pound does in *Canto I* is to provide his own tensely archaic translation of a sixteenth-century Latin translation of part of Book XI of Homer's *Odyssey.*[2] This book is the so-called Nekuia, the Book of the Dead—itself thought to be one of the earliest parts of the *Odyssey.* Already Pound is making a point. We see Homer (to the extent that we still do), as refracted through the lenses of twenty-five (or more) centuries of Homeric

[1] Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions Books, 1996). Pound's dates were 1885–1972. An American by birth, he lived much of his life in Europe. In the first half of the twentieth century he was one of the most influential figures in literature throughout the world, both because of his own poetry and because of his assistance to and promotion of others (including T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway and James Joyce). His *Cantos* were a lifelong sequence of poems: although the first group were only actually published in 1934, he maintained that he began them in 1904–1905, and he was still working on them when he died. The *Cantos* (117 of them plus fragments) are an attempt to bind up in poetic form our (or Pound's) debt to the past where it really matters, and where, for the most part, it has been forgotten. All of Pound's obsessions are there—his admiration for Confucius and John Adams, his love of the Malatesta Temple in Rimini and of the *Odyssey,* his hatred of usury as the enemy of generative love and fertility, his (qualified) support for Mussolini. This last led to him broadcasting for Mussolini during the war, after which he was incarcerated by the Americans in a cage outside Pisa, and subsequently (until 1958) in a lunatic asylum in Washington DC. The *Pisan Cantos* recount what led to his disastrous decision to broadcast, and in poetry of a very high order, his descent into hell in Pisa and of his re-connection while he was in the cage with the natural and human worlds.

[2] The *First Canto* (appearing first in *A Draft of XXX Cantos,* originally published in 1934), is based on the 1538 (Latin) translation of the *Odyssey* by Andreas Divus Justinopolitanus, a copy of which Pound picked up in Paris around 1908, as he tells us.

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reading and study and thought. But the meaning deepens when we consider the context of the Nekuia.

In the previous book of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus had been living in somewhat reluctant luxury with the enchantress Circe. Although his life with Circe is not without its pleasure, she is actually keeping him captive, when he what he really wants is to return to his home in Ithaca. Eventually Circe agrees to let him go, but Odysseus must first sail to the land of the Cimmerians, a sunless land of mist and fog. There he and his companions will find the entrance to Hades, the domain of the dead, and there Odysseus is to consult the dead prophet Tiresias on his chances of returning home. In Pound's own translation, in *Canto XLVII,* Circe says this:

> First must thou go the road
> to hell
> And to the bower of Ceres' daughter Proserpine,
> Through overhanging dark, to see Tiresias,
> Eyeless that was, a shade, that is in hell
> So full of knowing that the beefy men know less than he,
> Ere thou come to thy road's end.
> Knowledge the shade of a shade,
> Yet thou must sail after knowledge
> Knowing less than drugged beasts.

Circe forbears to mention that it is she who had turned Odysseus's men into drugged beasts, but what she does tell him is this: in order to find his *home,* which is what he really wants, Odysseus must consult one who has more wisdom than the living. For the living (including Odysseus himself at this point) are no more enlightened than drugged beasts; so he must consult one who is *dead,* the blind prophet Tiresias. And to get to the dead, he must travel a hard road, a *journey* distant in miles and in mentality from the intoxicating delights of Circe's palace and bed. He and his men must set sail again, on the ship Circe gives them.

> And then went down to the ship,
> Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
> We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
> Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also
> Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward
> Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,
> Circe's this craft . . .

When, after carrying out due sacrifice and encountering one of their own dead companions, Odysseus does meet Tiresias, the news is not good. Odysseus has angered Poseidon, the god of the sea (because he blinded

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Polyphemus, the Cyclops, who is Poseidon's son). So although Odysseus himself will return, due to Poseidon's spite, he will "lose all companions" (as, we might add, did Pound himself decades later, though no blame is due here to Poseidon; had he himself listened more closely to the dead, he might not have been so comprehensively seduced by Mussolini's characteristically modern propaganda and rhetoric. Pound, a drugged beast indeed). However, at the end of *Canto I* Pound does afford us a glimpse of Aphrodite "with golden girdles and breast bands, with dark eyelids bearing the golden bough" of Hermes (who is the guider of souls to the underworld). So, in the midst of death, perhaps, for those who go down into Hades and are reborn, there may be love and fertility and the gifts of the Cyprian goddess.

To say that there is a message here, in so many layered a narrative, would be ridiculous. But let us just reflect on the idea that home can only be found by talking to the dead, particularly after a difficult journey. Of course, Pound's own poetic enterprise was an attempt to listen to the dead, and indeed to get them to talk once more. We are drugged beasts otherwise, in thrall not to Circe but to the clamor and mindlessness of the present. Without a sense of our roots, cultural and otherwise, and a recognition of the timeless truths embedded there, we do not know who we are. We do not know where home is. Our minds and souls, and maybe our bodies too, are sterile. For all the ease we might find in our Circean palace, we are in a wasteland.

We have heard a lot about the supposed iniquity of university and other school courses being filled up with the works of dead white men. I was once attacked in print (by a professor of education, needless to say) for allegedly advocating a curriculum of the dead. The professor was, of course, following the injunction of philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952) in *Democracy and Education,*[3] to let the dead bury their dead. Dewey believed that any study of history which did not take as its starting point "some present situation with its problems" would be worthless. Actually if we follow Pound's and Homer's lead, what we should be advocating is exactly the opposite: a curriculum that puts us (and our children) in touch with those who have helped to form what we are, and with those who themselves have been in touch with truths transcending our time. We will learn little from the past if we insist on looking at it through the prism of the present, and as it might appear to relate to our current problems and perspectives. Most of us find it easy to sympathize with uprooted people who want to discover or rediscover their origins, when they are the descendents of slaves or of those fleeing famine or persecution—and rightly so. But a recapitulation of the common heritage of Western Civilization in and for itself is met all too often with disdain or worse.

[3] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916) (New York: Free Press, 1997), see chap. 16.

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I have no wish to be polemical here, but simply wish to suggest that the most rewarding antidote to the mindlessness of the present is entry into the conversation which began with Homer, and which has continued (more or less) ever since, until perhaps now. Initially this may not be easy. The world of writers before our own time may seem strange and difficult to penetrate. These writers may have beliefs and practices alien to us, and even at times repugnant. Their world may not at first sight seem to have any bearing on our current problems; and to insist on looking at it through the prism of the present will almost certainly distort its true nature (as when we bring our prejudices about racism, feminism, and the like to analyze Greek or Roman society, for example, before we have tried to understand the meaning and dynamic of these societies on their own terms). We will have to undertake a journey of discovery in order to be in a position to listen to what the dead have to tell us.

In reading and discussing Greek tragedy and Plato, Virgil, Ovid, and Horace, to say nothing of Augustine, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton, along with Camoes and Cervantes, and Racine and Goethe, we will enter worlds and experiences otherwise unimaginable in the twenty-first century. From these we could learn so much about ourselves, about our forbears, and about our true home—if we, like Odysseus, were prepared to listen to the dead. Moreover, as one does this, one discovers that one is participating in a conversation which has gone on for so many centuries—as we see with Pound, but not only with Pound—and with so much commentary back and forth. One begins to swim in a sea of wisdom, which if not actually timeless, is deeper and broader than any one time, and which affords a vantage point from which to judge momentary presents.

II. Dewey and Darwin

John Dewey, among all modern thinkers, articulates most clearly and forcefully a vision of life and education antithetical to the one I have just outlined. Dewey believed that Darwin's theory of evolution was the greatest solvent of contemporary thought about old questions, a climax brought about in general terms by the scientific revolution but, as far as human affairs were concerned, most particularly by *The Origin of Species* (1859).[4] We can argue about the extent to which Darwin was a Social Darwinist (wanting the elimination of the unfit and so forth) and about the contradictions (or not) between his theory and religious belief, but, as important as these issues are, they may not represent the most profound effect

[4] John Dewey, "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy," in *The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1951). In my analysis of Dewey, I have drawn on Bradley C. S. Watson, *Living Constitution, Dying Faith* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2009), chap. 3.

Darwin's theory has had on the modern mind. According to Dewey, Darwin sank "the sacred ark of permanency," that, under the influence of the Aristotelian notions of final causes and fixed species, had conditioned our thinking about ourselves. Post-Darwin, everything—morality, religion, politics—should be regarded as changeable, and up for revision as, in ever-changing circumstances, we face new dilemmas and construct for ourselves new goals.

Thinking of life in Darwinian terms will lead us to the ineluctable conclusion that over the course of millennia, thousands, if not millions, of species have evolved, and become extinct. Each species survives for the time it does because it solves its problems better than its competitors; but success here is always relative to the time and the problems posed at and by the time. Since new problems and new solutions, including new species, emerge all the time, a solution—and a successful species—at time t may be nothing of the sort at time t+1. Even if time t's species soldiers on through time t+1 and beyond, it will be in part, at least, because factors within its makeup and behavior suited it to the problems it had to face at t+1 rather than those which made it successful in relation to the challenges it had to face at t. Very often, as we know, time t's champion fails at time t+1; the fossil record is replete with traces of species which failed to make it through, despite (or even because of) their great successes and adaptability at earlier times. The history of evolution is predominantly that of species which have become extinct.

What Dewey did was to generalize the evolutionary story so as to include human history and human affairs. Growth is his guiding metaphor here, as elsewhere, and in human affairs growth basically means developing in such a way that one is able to produce new solutions to new problems. Life itself, for Dewey, is a continual and unending process of problem solving. In the human realm, the knowledge and culture of the past is predominantly the deposit of old solutions to the problems of yesterday, and earlier still in time. Quite consistently, his occasional nod to the great minds of the past notwithstanding, there is in Dewey's thinking a relentless focus on the modern, and on the demands of the present. Far from wanting us to savor the best that has been thought and said, Dewey insisted that what has been done and known is merely the deposit of yesterday's solutions to yesterday's problems.

The best analogue in human culture to the evolutionary method is science—that is, science regarded as a process of progressive problem solving, often of a practical, technological nature, in which the theories and technologies of the past are as dead as the fossils in some pre-Cambrian rock—historical curiosities, of antiquarian interest perhaps, but of no relevance to what we want to do today. After all, it would be urged, today's scientists do not have to know about Aristotle's biology, let alone his physics, or about Ptolemy's astronomy. These figures are the intellec-

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tual equivalents, it would be said, of long extinct biological species, irrelevant to the problems of today.

Would it, though, take us too far in a Kuhnian direction to raise at least an eyebrow here?[5] It is undoubtedly true that today's scientists are by and large trained in ignorance of the work of their predecessors, but it may nevertheless be the case that this itself is a product of an evolutionary approach to science and its methods which a) takes too much for granted the absolute superiority of contemporary scientific theory over past paradigms, and b) conspires to close the minds of today's scientists to possibilities other than those enshrined in today's scientific theories and practices. Maybe, even in Dewey's preferred area of activity, the scientific, a strictly evolutionary attitude to scientific practice and education is not altogether healthy; but that was not a doubt in Dewey's own mind.

III. Education for Democracy

So far, so Darwinian. Anyone attempting to follow Dewey in applying his philosophy to education will, like Dewey himself, evince scant regard for the achievements of the past. But there is to Dewey's thought an idealistic, Hegelian aspect, over and above his Darwinism. Unlike Darwin, and like Hegel and the idealists, Dewey believed strongly in human society as a quasi-organic reality. Dewey saw social divisions and competitiveness as inherently harmful, as fracturing and subverting the wholes which give individuals their meaning and in communion with which they best flourish. One way in which this sort of community spirit is broken up is by the differences of achievement which are so marked a feature of traditional systems of education, with their grading and competitiveness. These devices for sifting people become particularly pernicious when, as Dewey believes is the case, the knowledge and skills being tested are about things which interest only small and exclusive sections of a society. Against arcane specialization of this sort, Dewey will insist that a good education focuses on topics in which the whole community has an interest, and problems which are of obvious practical import.

On these matters, in which all have a direct involvement and interest, everyone will have his or her point of view, and everyone should be heard, not just as a matter of democratic decency, but also because each different perspective will have something worthwhile to contribute. For Dewey and his followers, therefore, education should be an exercise of democracy in miniature, with the teacher a leader of group

[5] I am referring here to Thomas Kuhn's argument in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961), passim, that the core premises of ruling scientific models are never really refuted when the models in question are replaced, but only passed over and forgotten—with the possibility of being revived in new forms in the future.

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work and group discussions, rather than, in Dewey's own words, "an external boss or dictator" (as if *any* form of benign exercise of authority and wisdom on the part of a teacher is tantamount to political oppression as far as Dewey is concerned). And it is not just for the sake of what goes on in the school that participatory democracy should be the norm and mode of activity. Just as the topics to be analyzed and worked on (researched, in Dewey's terms) are to be those of relevance to the wider community in which the school exists, and for which it exists, so the practice of democratic involvement and negotiation within the school is a preparation for democratic activity outside the school when the pupils become adults and are ready to play their part in the democratic deliberations and decision-making of the wider, adult community, both in politics and in the work place.

The idea that education is important because it makes people ready for participation in democratic politics, and keen so to participate is taken for granted to such an extent nowadays, even by people espousing different and more traditional views of education than Dewey, that it is worth spending a little time analyzing its implications. In an era when public spending is under examination, and decisions on public spending must be justified in terms of their social and economic impact, the idea might seem attractive because it gives a rationale for spending public money on education. We need education because otherwise we will not have a population of individuals able effectively to exercise their democratic rights and duties. And this line of argument is frequently adduced in order to justify including in education areas of study, such as history, literature, and the classics, which may at first sight seem remote from narrowly economic or utilitarian concerns. Though this might not be Dewey's way here, it will be urged that this broad training of the mind is necessary in a society in which people are expected to play a role in politics and public life. Hence public spending on these things needs no further justification.

At a very basic level, any such argument, either in narrowly Deweyesque terms, or in a broader, more traditionalist form is an argument from cause to effect. The argument suggests that if people are educated in this way they will turn out to be mature democratic deliberators, and that this effect justifies public spending on education and, ultimately, education itself. Any such argument is thus vulnerable to empirical disproof. Disproof will occur if people who have been educated according to the required prescriptions turn out to have little interest in politics, or turn out simply to have a bundle of largely unexamined prejudices, rather than exercising that significant degree of independent judgment which an education for democracy is supposed to induce. It will also be, to say the least, unfortunate, if people educated in a Deweyesque spirit, or in some other mode whose supporters see it as contributing to the ideals of democracy, turn out to be indifferent to the political process or even hostile to it.

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Although one imagines that followers of Dewey will insist that there are few educational systems anywhere in the world which enact enough of Dewey's prescriptions, to dispassionate observers of the state education systems in Britain and the United States, it will seem that they have not been untouched by the sorts of things which Dewey advocates, such as a stress on group work, on pupil activity and so-called "discovery" and "research," on "critical thinking," on multiculturalism and on a generally egalitarian and anti-elitist attitude to curricula and assessments. In any event, however, populations of high school graduates are being produced who are neither knowledgeable about democratic processes nor keen to participate in them. An enervating cynicism about politics and about much else besides seems far more prevalent even among university students, and even there among those who profess an interest in politics, the tendency is to follow left-liberal organs of public opinion which foster such attitudes. There is enough of Dewey in the mass education systems of Britain and the United States to make one doubtful that more of it will remedy the political apathy so prevalent in those countries.

If Deweyesque forms of education may not have the political effects their supporters intend and claim, for those hoping that education can be a stimulant to democratic activity, the picture is, if anything even more problematic in the case of traditional forms of education—at least it is, if one considers the levels of support among university teachers and students in Germany and Austria for the Third Reich during the 1920s and 1930s. No doubt there were plenty of other factors at work here, as in other cases where intelligentsia have supported tyranny. This in itself does not condemn the forms of education to which these people had been exposed (or at least, not until explicit indoctrination became a part of the education in question). But it does show that an education in the classics and the sciences did not in itself give its ex-pupils the sense or courage to resist what was going on in the wider society of their time, nor indeed does it necessarily fill its pupils with enthusiasm for the sorts of democratic arrangements favoured by today's political elites. The main conclusion I want to draw at this point, though, is simply that looking for a direct political result from a form of education is not just risky, empirically speaking; it is actually to look for the justification of a form of education in the wrong place, in its effects rather than in what it is in and for itself.

IV. A Good in Itself

In the case of traditional liberal education, the claims of some of its defenders notwithstanding, this would be all to the good, for it is a form of education which—at least in the hands of Blessed John Henry Newman (1801–90), its most distinguished advocate—claims that the

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cultivation of the intellect is a good in itself, and that what is studied in it is worthwhile for its own sake.[6] Of course, people schooled in these things *may* turn out to be, in Newman's sense, gentlemen, that is, people with a mature generosity of judgment and intellectual patience and sophistication; but, equally they might end up running advertising agencies, populist political parties and relentlessly down-market television companies. (In Britain, this is just what some of the most successful of them do.) If, as Newman sometimes seems to claim, the *justification* of liberal education is that it turns out generations of gentlemen, we and he are doomed to disappointment. He and we should simply bite the bullet and insist on the intrinsic value of what is done in liberal education (knowing about the world, the soul and God, through studying the best that has been thought and known, and being thus enabled to develop the conversations into which we enter in and through that form of education).

However, invoking the intrinsic value of what is to be studied is just what the follower of Dewey cannot do in regard to his conception of education. For Dewey, education is a means to help the community collectively solve its problems and to encourage the type of community activism he sees as underpinning democratic problem solving. It is from this perspective that the initiatives associated with Dewey derive their rationale: group work, discussion, relevance, practical research devoted to the examination of perceived problems, "learning to learn" and the insistence on the value of pupils "discovering" things for themselves. It is also from this perspective that the sort of inclusiveness sought by Dewey becomes important, because he desires an approach to local and national government in which all participate in collective opinion forming and decision-making. Democracy, in Dewey's view, is more than a mode of government, or a means of getting rid of rulers regularly and peacefully; it is to be seen as what he calls a mode of "associated living," in which there is continuous readjustment of both individuals and the community as a whole in response to ever-changing problems and situations. And the onus is always on us, individually and collectively, to think out our solutions afresh in the light of ever-changing circumstances, eschewing dogma and authority as illusory crutches, and striving always to see what we regard as knowledge as analyzable mediately or immediately in terms of its practical effects. In the context of such a philosophy, education itself becomes intensely political, with the demand that it focuses on driving a highly political agenda responsive not to timeless or long-held wisdom, but to needs or perceived needs of the present sociopolitical situation.

[6] John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1858) (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982) esp. chap. 5.

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V. The Needs of the "People": Contemporary Politics

A fully comprehensive international analysis of contemporary state education is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, taking Britain as an example, the Deweyesque trends identified at the end of the last section (group work, problem solving, relevance, and so on) are increasingly dominant in state education. Given that similar trends are evident in other advanced democracies—which readers can verify for themselves—the conclusion must be that those who look to a different form of education (a classically centered liberal education, for example), are unlikely to find a home in a state system in the twenty-first century. State education *may,* in certain periods of the past, have tolerated or even fostered elements of a liberal education; but this was at a time when politicians were far more content to adopt a "hands off" attitude to education. In most advanced liberal democracies of today, it is taken for granted that politicians will actually run the systems of education they see themselves as funding, and run them in a way that emphasizes their own projects of utilitarian outcomes and social engineering. In practice this comes to mean that education systems are far more consonant with Deweyesque ideals than with anything approaching a liberal system of education. The latter takes for granted that certain subjects have been shown over time to be good in themselves and also that in these studies ability and achievement are very unequally distributed. Both of these assumptions run counter to the egalitarian "presentism" of the contemporary political mind.

The idea that state education ought to reflect contemporary political imperatives should come as no surprise to anyone who glances at the various ends to which it has been put since the nineteenth century, when modern states began to interest themselves in education. Thus, while state education, wherever and whenever it has existed, has always had as one of its aims the narrowly utilitarian one of preparing populations for work (whether manual or mental), it has also had the more local aims consonant with local political imperatives. These have included promoting evangelical Christianity against Catholicism (in the United States), nation building in general (in Prussia and Germany), promoting the values of the secular state (in France), and the preparing a cadre of young people apt for military service and the administration of an over-extended empire (Britain), to take four characteristic examples from the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, in addition to some or all of these, education has been conceived by politicians as an agent of social mobility and for a more egalitarian society. This, together with a stress on contemporaneity and on economic needs, has tended to make politicians sympathetic to conceptions of education closer to Dewey than to Newman.

In each case the policy in question is defended by claiming that education is a social concern. As such, it should reflect social needs and values—or what politicians take those needs and values to be. Moreover,

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as the state funds education, it should have a direct interest in its administration and aims. (The fact that this funding is only possible because of taxation from individuals who might have very different ideas on education is normally overlooked at this point.) Further as societies have become more democratic and the state more intrusive and powerful, and democracy itself more populist, there have been moves to make education itself more egalitarian, shunning those aspects of the curriculum which cannot be shared by all, and avoiding elitism (as it would be called) in access to educational provision—both themes which would have resonated with Dewey, for whom what is now known as inclusiveness was the very touchstone of a healthy system of education.

We need not deny that education is in some sense a social concern, nor that society as a whole has an interest in seeing that its members are educated. But, as J. S. Mill argued in *On Liberty,*[7] saying that education is a social concern need not imply that the state has a paternalistic duty to see that children are educated. It does not follow from the social importance of education that the state itself should run, regulate or finance it. Indeed Mill argued, to the contrary, that a general state education would be little more than a "mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another," and that "in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind leading by natural tendency to one over the body."[8] Dewey, by contrast, had no such doubts: As long ago as 1889, he averred that "what the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children," adding that "any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our community."[9] So, Dewey seems to think that democracy will be *destroyed* unless the community has a single system of education, predicated on the will of the best and wisest parent. Such a single system is just what Mill feared, in fact.

VI. England and Elsewhere

If the National Curriculum in England[10] under the New Labour government of 1997–2010 is a guide, the best and wisest parent turns out to have favored a child-centered and largely content-free curriculum, replete with new subjects such as "citizenship" and "personal, social, and health education." It is a curriculum that seems to want to address every perceived social problem, from obesity to smoking, from alcohol, drug abuse,

[7] J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (1859) (as in *Utilitarianism,* ed., Mary Warnock, London: Collins/Fontana), chap. 5.

[8] Ibid., 239–40.

[9] John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1907), 19.

[10] England: because due to various constitutional complications, the National Curriculum voted on and approved by the UK Parliament, including MPs from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, applies only to England.

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and teenage pregnancy to pedophilia, "homophobia," global warming, inequality, and racism—anything and everything that was part of that government's agenda of social engineering, and, therefore, anything and everything *except* concentrated and disinterested attention to the best that had been thought and known.

It will doubtless be pointed out that in England a national curriculum was not actually introduced by New Labour, but by a very different government, that of Mrs. Thatcher, who personally would have had little truck with any of the above. There are still, in conservative circles in Britain, politicians who cling to the dream of Mrs. Thatcher, that by central government decree a curriculum of a more traditional kind could be imposed on the country as a whole. The most basic reason why both Mrs. Thatcher and her followers were deluded in this matter is that it is not possible by central government edict to force some four hundred thousand state-certified and state trained teachers to do something many of them are temperamentally opposed to and intellectually unprepared for—for their formation has been in the hands of those more influenced by Dewey and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78)[11] than by Newman or Matthew Arnold (1822–88), of whom they have probably never heard.[12] And even the New Labour government of 1997–2010, to which the teachers and their unions were far closer in spirit, struggled to get teachers to carry out a couple of simple tests of reading and arithmetic in primary schools. Even if the teachers were more malleable than they are, however, there would still be the customary bureaucratic inertia to overcome in attempting what would have amounted to a sea-change in attitude, to say nothing of the downright opposition to such a change within what might be called the educational establishment: government officials, local administrators, teacher trainers, university departments of education, inspectors, teacher unions and the self-styled "subject associations." I know how prevalent the opposition is, because from 1993–1997 I was a member of the governmental advisory board charged with developing the national curriculum in England and Wales. Most of my time on it was spent attempting to outmaneuver and circumvent this establishment, to little avail during the period in question and ultimately to no avail at all. The 1997 change of government simply handed to our opponents the instruments of power the Conservatives had unwisely forged and put in place (the outcome I did predict in the late 1980s when the national curriculum was being set up).

The fundamental difficulty faced by defenders of liberal education in a state system of education is that such a system is bound, by its very nature, to favor statist or collectivist policies. What this means in practice

[11] Cf. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education,* trans. Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom (1762; Dartmouth: Dartmouth College, 2009).

[12] Cf. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (London: Smith Elder 1882).

in the early twenty-first century is that it will be bureaucratic in operation and socially leveling in aspiration. It will be bureaucratic because of the political demands for accountability in the spending of public money, which will inevitably lead to demands for managerially quantifiable results; it will be socially leveling in aspiration because it is very hard to argue in a populist democracy (which is paying for the system in question) that some things are intrinsically better than others, and that some of what is intrinsically better is going to be beyond the abilities or understanding of the majority.

So no one should be surprised to read in the preamble to the English National Curriculum that education is "a route to equality of opportunity for all, a healthy and just democracy, a productive economy and sustainable development, valuing diversity in our society and the environment in which we live." Given that any genuine equality of opportunity will involve a continuous discounting of unequal outcomes at any stage, and given that the politics of diversity amounts in practice to a refusal to admit differences of quality between say, the art of the graffito dauber or of a rapper and that of Rembrandt or Bach, as well as the idea that culture is one inclusive conversation, these are anything but neutral requirements.

Nor should we forget that the modern world and the politics of the modern state are aspects of what Plato called the "great beast." The great beast is the public world, which can be pulled in any direction by the force of public opinion, and in a populist democracy, public opinion is easily manipulated by propaganda and the mass media. Political leaders are almost by necessity demagogues, in thrall to all sorts of interests and powers, and above all bound to celebrate the contemporary and the new, for that is where success and celebrity are to be found, and any hint that there may be timeless or ancient truths or values will throw into question the whole project of modernity. So we should not be surprised that even with the change of government in Britain in 2010, there has been no significant questioning of education's egalitarian aspirations, and no real freeing up of education from the target setting practices and insistence on quantifiable outcomes which destroy the liberal spirit. Nor should we expect there to be such a freeing-up trend, given that all politicians are constrained in similar ways, and given too that few politicians will ever renounce powers that they have inherited.

VII. Conclusion

While I have focused on the example of England, there is no reason to suppose that similar ideological drifts are not occurring in state education systems elsewhere in the developed world. Policy and practice of the sort advocated by Dewey are well-nigh inevitable once we forget our roots and see ourselves and our world in an evolutionarily progressive light;

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once progressivist evolutionism becomes the dominant force in a culture, the prospects for a form of education emphasizing timeless values are slim indeed. Actually, Dewey's evolutionism and his educational philosophy go together, and are mutually reinforcing, and, not coincidentally are the predominant ideology of the modern state (whether it is ostensibly conservative or left-liberal).

The conclusion is that those who wish to avoid the fate of the Homeric drugged beasts had best look outside the modern, progressivist state for forms of education congenial to them. This might mean schooling which is formally and technically independent (though even here, caution is recommended, as in Britain at least, progressivist and even statist ideas are not absent from the independent sector of education). But an independent sector of education within a system of predominantly state provision is always bound to be fighting a rearguard action against the ever-encroaching tentacles of state regulation and accreditation. It will also suffer from the charge that it is available only to a relatively privileged few. Whether this criticism is fair or not, such a charge is bound to be damaging to morale, and to put those against whom the charge is made inevitably on the defensive. Far better for those who value liberal education (and indeed other forms of education outside the collectivist norm) would be a system in which the state played no role in educational provision, such as Mill advocated. But would a state predicated on Deweyite progressivism ever countenance such a thing (through vouchers or tax credits, for example)? This is the crux on which advocates of liberal education are impaled, while the majority of the population—and nearly all politicians—cling to the illusion that improvements in education are merely a matter of implementing better policies. They do not see that, for liberal education anyway, the problem is the state itself. Whatever the rhetoric, and whatever the intentions of policymakers, in the modern world the whole dynamic of education is bound to be the opposite of liberal.[13,14]

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[13] An interesting test of this claim will be the current situation in England, where there is a government vigorously implementing what it believes to be a liberal education agenda. But if I am right, the outcome will do little more than embed yet more deeply the grip the state has on the system—to the ultimate detriment of the present government's aims.

[14] The research for this paper was undertaken while the author was a Visiting Scholar at the Social Philosophy and Policy Center, Bowling Green State University.

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