

A NEW ORDER
IN
ENGLISH EDUCATION

H. C. DENT

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By
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**THE TYPOGRAPHY AND BINDING OF
THIS BOOK CONFORM WITH THE
AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARDS**

PREFACE

THIS book is to be regarded as an introduction only. In it I have attempted to do no more than state a case, and to offer the merest outline of an answer. I have had to ignore many important problems and merely to glance at others. This has been with no desire to evade them, or to underrate their importance, but simply because space did not permit their treatment. They must form material for another book, or books.

First things first. The decision this country has to make—and quickly—is whether or not it desires to have an educational system that will truly educate for democracy. This decision is quite fundamental: without education for democracy we need not look for democracy. In the last resort the problem of society is the problem of education: and all our social disorders may be traced back to lack of right education.

I want to make it quite clear that I am not here concerned to picture some remote or nebulous Utopia. I am concerned with concrete proposals for the England of to-day and to-morrow. I believe that the overwhelming majority of people in this country desire radical changes in its social order—changes that shall lead towards a planned society based on democratic principles, infused with a genuinely democratic spirit, and ordered on fully democratic lines.

I believe this more equitable social order to be not impossible of achievement in the near future. I believe that the stresses of the war have paved the way for it, and that the period immediately after the war will offer a unique opportunity for bringing it into being.

I believe that if we seize that opportunity we shall as a people march forward to a grander and nobler destiny than we have yet known. But if we do not, I believe that the

opportunity will be lost for ever, that national disintegration and deterioration will set in and proceed with swiftly increasing acceleration, and make not only democracy but national recovery impossible.

Our immediate problem is to make sure that we shall be able to seize our opportunity. That will not be easy. Radical changes in the social order will not come about by the waving of some magic wand. Nor by wishful thinking, however earnestly or universally practised. They will not come about even because most people *want* them. In the present state of society they will come about for one of three reasons only: (a) because no one can stop them, (b) because a resolute minority seizes power and imposes them, or (c) because an informed public opinion demands them, and will brook no denial of its demands.

The first of these reasons spells anarchy, the second fascism, the third democracy. The third is the only reason we, as democrats, can admit.

To bring about social change by democratic methods for democratic ends, it is absolutely essential that every member of the community shall play his or her part. And there is a part for every one to play.

I am concerned in this book with educational reform, which I believe to be basic to all social reform. Educational reform touches the entire community: but I wish in the first instance to appeal to those more intimately concerned with it. I appeal first to every parent, teacher, and administrator of education, and then to all others interested in the future of our boys and girls—which means the future of England—to examine the proposals in these pages with unbiased mind; and then, if convinced that *in principle* they are sound (obviously the details will demand long and patient discussion and experiment) actively to propagand on their behalf; to do the utmost in their power to inform public opinion and to stimulate it to demand such a new order as they envisage.

Conversely, of course, those who are convinced that in principle they are unsound will be in duty bound to propaganda with all their might against them.

The matter is urgent. I am far from being alone in the belief that of all the reforms which must be made in our social order drastic reconstruction of our educational system ranks first and foremost. Many responsible thinkers, in this country and elsewhere, hold that no other aspect of social change can be satisfactorily proceeded with until we have analysed the educational needs of the society we have in mind, and arrived at some idea of how they can be satisfied. That we must do *before* the war ends. Directly it is over the time for action has come.

Educational reconstruction ranks first because, in relation to society, a national system of education has two vital functions to perform: a tradition-preserving function and a growth-facilitating function. In a time of social flux both these functions become overwhelmingly important. They decide the future. It is imperative to-day that those elements in our English tradition—and they are many—which are worthy of preservation shall be preserved and handed on. That is essentially the task of education. It is equally—some would say even more—imperative that we as a people shall grow more democratically minded; for without the democratic mind the democratic order cannot be sustained. In that task education must play a vital part.

Our present educational set-up (it is not a system but a congerie of systems) is quite incapable either of preserving the best elements in our tradition or of facilitating the growth of society along more democratic lines. But it is only too capable, unhappily, of perpetuating and strengthening those undemocratic elements in our present order of society which we desire to eliminate. We can look for no permanent new order in society unless we have a new order in education.

I would like to express my thanks to Mr. John Armitage, Managing Editor of *The Fortnightly*, for permission to incorporate in this book matter from an article of mine he published in July 1941, and to the Management of *The Times* Publishing Co., Ltd., for permission to incorporate material previously published in *The Times Educational Supplement*. I am deeply indebted to my colleague and friend, Miss Joan Peel, who read the book in manuscript and made many valuable suggestions.

H. C. DENT

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There must be no place after the war for special privileges for either individuals or nations.

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

If this principle were accepted and included in the terms of reference of those who are engaged in planning post-war reconstruction, it would mean a complete revolution in the society of to-day.

ERNEST GREEN

in "Education for a New Society."

I

THE NEED FOR A NEW ORDER

BRTAIN faces to-day the greatest crisis in her history. She is confronted with two gigantic tasks: and it is a matter of life and death to her that she succeed in both. With her Allies, she must win the war; unaided, she must rid herself of the diseases in her social system and rebuild her social order on a juster and fairer basis. If she fails in the first task she will perish at the hands of the Nazis; if she fails in the second she will perish by her own act and volition.

There is reason for sober confidence that the United Nations will win the war. There is no reason to doubt that Britain is capable of ridding herself of the diseases that poison her, and of achieving genuine and robust health. She has set before herself a noble ideal—the attainment of full democracy—and the magnificent qualities innate in her people are guarantee that it is not beyond her power to translate this ideal into reality. What is by no means so certain is that she realises either the nature or the immensity of the effort which must be made.

“The most serious ground of anxiety about the making of peace,” writes E. H. Carr in his arresting book “Conditions of Peace”¹ “is the same which has handicapped our waging of war: complacency and an ingrained disposition to minimise the exacting nature of the task.” “It is inconceivable,” he says in another chapter, “that we can play a leading part in the reconstruction of the world and leave the structure of society in Britain unchanged and unaltered. A successful foreign policy for Great Britain is now possible only on the basis of a substantially altered outlook which will inevitably reflect itself in almost every branch of domestic policy.” How substantial an alteration he envisages may be

¹ “Conditions of Peace.” By Edward Hallett Carr. Macmillan. 1942.

deduced from the final words of the book: "The old world is dead. The future lies with those who can resolutely turn their back on it and face the new world with understanding, courage, and imagination." I am in entire agreement with this diagnosis of the situation.

We have reached a point at which nothing less than a social revolution is the condition of our survival. We have allowed social progress to lag too far behind material progress. In an era of unprecedented material advance, we have up till now been content to rely for social advancement upon the terribly slow processes of evolutionary change. Those will no longer suffice. A new era is upon us. The "century of the common man," when all alike must share the basic freedoms, is dawning, and the present world-wide conflict—a war of ideas no less than of armies—is hurrying on its coming with breathless rapidity. We must move at similar speed, or we shall fall out of the march of civilisation.

In China, the Soviet Union, Turkey, Italy, Germany, the old order of society has been violently overthrown, and an entirely different one set up. Whatever we may think of some of the "new orders" which are the immediate results of these revolutions, of the philosophies on which they are based, or of the methods by which they have been achieved, one thing is certain: the magnitude and the profundity of the changes in these countries are a correct index of the scale on which social reconstruction must take place in any civilised society, including our own, which would hope to maintain itself in the world of to-morrow.

Many people in this country, however, refuse to accept this inescapable conclusion. Not because they deny the necessity for reform of our social order—on the contrary, they advocate it—but because they are unwilling, or afraid, to believe that such far-reaching changes as have taken place in other countries will ever be necessary here. They point to the fact that the social order in Britain already includes many of the attributes of democracy, refer with

pride to the stability of our national life, and shrink instinctively from any suggestion of radical alteration of our established institutions of society. They cannot, or will not, see that it is these very features of our society which constitute the most formidable obstacle to the achievement of full democracy, because they are the main bulwarks and defences of the many profoundly undemocratic elements and interests in our midst.

The result is a pathetic exhibition of schizophrenia—the “split mind.” On the one hand there is an intense and almost universal desire for a genuinely democratic order of society, on the other a widespread reluctance to accept the implication that this must of necessity involve a complete reorientation of our attitude towards the whole idea of living in community—which probably means a period of instability in our national life—and a drastic reformation and realignment of existing institutions of society. Large sections of influential opinion—in politics, finance, industry, the Church, education—are obviously clinging to the belief that the coming of full democracy need involve no considerable alteration in their way of life, and that a gradual amelioration of the existing institutions of society, without essential change in their functions, their structure or their relationships one with the other, will suffice to bring Britain safely on an even keel into the desired haven. No delusion could be more complete.

Nowhere is the “split mind” more in evidence than in the field of education. The necessity for radical reform of the entire educational order in England is scarcely contested. The desire for it is virtually universal. The same democratic ideal—full and equal opportunity for all—is professed on every hand. There is unanimous agreement that the existing set-up is highly undemocratic, and that its relationships with other institutions of society—notably industry and organised religion—are wholly unsatisfactory. Yet almost all the numerous plans which are being proliferated

for its reform—certainly all those in any way officially or professionally sponsored—are based on retention of the main structure (or lack of structure, rather) of that set-up, and on the continuance of the same general relationships which it holds with other institutions of society.

Nothing could be more disastrous for the future of Britain. Democracy cannot be achieved without education for democracy. The democratic way of life cannot be lived save by a democratically minded community, and this is the last type of community the present set-up, however much modified, could be expected to produce. It is both quantitatively and qualitatively grossly inadequate to meet the needs of a democracy. It represents the very essence of inequality of opportunity. It is socially stratified to a degree that would be ludicrous were it not so tragic. Its purposes are directed, not by educational considerations, but by considerations of social and economic status, and the philosophy underlying it is that, not of a democratic society, but of an acquisitive and hierarchic society. Large sections of it are bound hand and foot to an academic, bookish, and sedentary curriculum wholly irrelevant to the life and needs of any modern civilised society, tied to objectives which restrict "its central field to the kind of training which can be imparted by instruction and tested by written examinations"¹ and condemned (by the meanness of the provision) to a mass production technique which makes real attention to individual needs all but impossible, yet virtually excludes from the classroom any and every form of genuinely collective activity.

To talk of educational reform in terms of modification of the existing set-up is to talk in terms of a palliative, not a cure. However much we might improve it in detail, the whole would still be confined within the limits of the conception of education it represents, and we should have no

¹ "Education for a Free Society." Geoffrey Vickers. *The Christian News Letter*, January 31, 1940.

option but to accept the order of society which it would inevitably perpetuate.

If we really mean to have full democracy in Britain, it is obligatory upon us that we rethink entirely our conception of the educational process. We must rethink it in terms of a democratic philosophy of education. Otherwise we cannot hope to plan an educational system that will have a democratic purpose.

Such purpose is essential, for it must never be overlooked that it is impossible to restrict the function of education to reflection of the order of society. Whether we will it or no, the educational system of necessity also conditions the development of society. The overriding argument against retention of the existing educational set-up in England is that, however much improved, it could not possibly condition the development of society in the direction of full democracy. Its influence would be all the other way.

The extent to which the educational system conditions the development of society has never been properly appreciated in this country, though in view of the enormous influence of the public schools upon our national life during the past hundred years it is difficult to understand why. To-day we have no longer the slightest excuse for such blindness. All the peoples who are building for themselves a new order of society are deliberately using their educational system as a major instrument for its fashioning: and nothing could be more obvious than the phenomenal success they are obtaining. The spirit of the youth of China, of the Soviet Union, of Turkey, and (most unhappily) of Germany is convincing evidence of that. Whatever the nature of the society aimed at, it is clear that the educational system is one of the most powerful—if not indeed the chief—means by which it can be brought about.

We must be prepared to learn from friend and foe. Our ideal is a full democracy. If we believe in it sufficiently, there is no question but that we can achieve it. Given the

intelligence of the English people—which I maintain is undeniable—given our energy, our eminently practical yet strongly idealist turn of mind, our unfailing and ready tolerance, our courage, persistence, determination, and our saving grace of humour, and there would appear to be no heights of democracy to which we may not aspire. But we must have the right tools with which to shape these qualities of ours to democratic ends, and those we assuredly have not got to-day.