

WHAT IS AN EDUCATED PERSON?

The Decades Ahead

edited by

Martin Kaplan

An Aspen Institute Book

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Foreword by Alan Bullock



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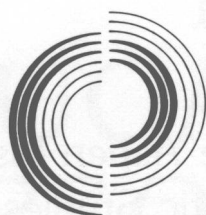
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WHAT
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FOREWORD

by Alan Bullock

This book is a product of two meetings, both organized by the Aspen Institute. The first took place in a summer in Aspen, Colorado; the second, at the end of a European winter, overlooking the Havel Lake in Berlin.

To some who heard what we were meeting to discuss, the title "The Educated Person in the Contemporary World" seemed intolerably elitist. Those taking part showed themselves from the first determined to give no grounds for this sort of criticism. I do not think that I have taken part in any discussion about education in which, almost without exception, everyone who participated showed so little desire to score debating points or defend established positions, and spoke more frankly and at times passionately out of personal experience.

It surprised me that the phrase "the educated person" stung most of the Americans, who made up the majority of the participants; for them these were clearly fighting words in a way they were not for the Europeans. This at least prevented the occasion from being dull. Argument always flared up or was given a lift by some statement that offered a new slant on the question or cleared a way through a confused tangle of words. The one thing we could not do was reach agreement on what was meant by the phrase "educated person," what it ought to mean, whether it had any meaning at all, or whether any meaning it might have could only be unacceptable. By the end of a fortnight, what answers each of us would give to these questions were perfectly clear; and even within a homogeneous group, which could be expected to share many of the same assumptions, the answers could not be reconciled. This led several of the participants to conclude that we had failed. Although exasperated, as one of the joint chairmen, by my own inability to steer the discussion to an agreed conclusion, I did not share this view; and I am even less inclined to do so after reading, and rereading, the verbatim record.

I am convinced now, as I half suspected at the time, that if we had reached agreement, it would have been too facile—a papering over of differences; the value of the discussion was in documenting and illuminating these differences. There were some who felt that education (however defined) could—indeed, must—provide a way of overcoming the social conflicts, cultural contra-

dictions, and moral confusion of our society. But I ended up, and I believe others who were present did too, seeing this as an illusion and accepting that a divided society is the context in which education has to start and to work. This is substantially the same conclusion that Martin Kaplan, in his introductory essay, reaches independently.

Mr. Kaplan's argument is couched in terms of the American experience, and although several of the contributors came from other countries, this was true of much of the discussion at Aspen. This did not worry me. I do not share the view that what happens in the United States today will happen in the rest of the world (or at least in Europe) tomorrow, but I believe that those of us who came from overseas could recognize our own societies' symptoms sufficiently well in the American experience to give the discussion a wider currency.

It had originally been our intention, in order to meet this point, to hold a parallel discussion in Europe; and I agreed to act as chairman of this. But after reflecting on the lessons to be learned from the Aspen meeting, I persuaded those responsible that this would be a mistake. We were even less likely to find agreement in Europe—where there are still great differences among national systems of education (let alone deep ideological division)—than in America. It seemed to me that instead of repeating the original experiment in a different context, it would be better to try to push the argument a stage further. I thought we might be able to do this and secure a more structured discussion if we addressed ourselves to the more specific question "What kind of education should we be working toward for the end of the 20th century?"

We circulated the papers that had been prepared for the Aspen meeting, but this time we structured the discussion in advance and set a different topic for each session. The result was a discussion that was less rumbustious and wide-ranging than that at Aspen, but also less exasperating and more practical. Before we broke up, we were able to pick out a number of questions that needed further examination, chief among them, perhaps, what should be the role and character of secondary education. To our good fortune, Torsten Husén, who had taken a leading part in our discussion, agreed to make a comparative study of this at the invitation of the Aspen Institute Berlin. Francis Keppel has incorporated other questions into the Aspen Institute's continuing Program in Education for a Changing Society, of which he is the director.

At the end we were left with 1,500 pages of papers and transcripts and the difficult question of how to produce a report

that could be given wider circulation. We were anxious to avoid a dehydrated version of discussions that had been anything but solemn and self-important, and to convey something of the concentration of interest and interplay of minds achieved in the best moments. We were fortunate in finding in Martin Kaplan an editor who saw a way of doing this—by breaking away from the day-to-day sequence of the transcripts and selecting five questions around which he has grouped the papers and a selection, in direct speech, from the Aspen and Berlin discussions. This was a bold proposal that, in less skillful hands, might easily have miscarried. After comparing the result with the transcripts, however, I believe Mr. Kaplan has succeeded, to a remarkable extent, in producing a coherent and readable account of the issues we were discussing without losing the flavor of the original. He has added an introduction that puts the discussions into their social and cultural context better, I believe, than any of us succeeded in doing at the time. For all this we are very much in his debt.

I have never attended any seminar or workshop of this kind, devoted to a very general topic, without asking myself afterwards, in a skeptical frame of mind, whether it was worthwhile. Worthwhile to whom? To those taking part, on this occasion, I would say "yes." At least, I find myself returning frequently in my thoughts to the impressions these discussions left behind. I now think and speak about the issues we discussed in a way different from the way I did before. But we should hardly have gone to the trouble of preparing this record if we had not believed, or at least hoped, that the argument in which we took part could have a wider impact. Is this a futile hope?

Today we are so impressed by the need for planning in education, so overawed by the bureaucratic structures we have created, that it is easy to conclude that only through these means can new initiative take effect. I am not convinced that this is so.

While taking part in these discussions, I was also acting as chairman of a committee set up by the British government to inquire into the level of literacy in England and Wales and to make recommendations for the improvement of language teaching. In the course of our inquiry, it became clear to us that there would be no funds available to carry out any of the reforms we wanted to propose, and that the government (which was by then in the hands of a different party) was not interested and would do nothing to implement any changes we recommended. We decided, therefore, to address our report not to ministers and civil servants, but to teachers, parents, and local education authorities. To our surprise—and even more, I suspect, to the surprise of the Department of Education—the report not only survived the absence of

official encouragement but was taken up with enthusiasm by local groups (especially teachers) throughout the country. The members of the committee found themselves overwhelmed with invitations to speak to meetings of people who were already proceeding to put our recommendations into practice without any official initiative. A year after the report was published, the leading educational journal, *The Times Educational Supplement*, ran three special numbers and organized a conference to report on the unexpected response that the report had elicited.

The reason for this was not to be found in the virtues of the report itself, which was lengthy, full of detail, expensive to buy, and (thanks to the inadequate number printed by the government) difficult to obtain. No, the reason was the fortunate coincidence (far from being planned) between its publication and an accumulated anxiety among those on whom implementation depended. It made them receptive to the suggestions we put forward, whether they had official blessing or not.

This experience leads me to ask whether, on other occasions besides the one I have described, the decisive factor in bringing about educational change may be the dissatisfaction with accepted views felt by those most closely concerned—teachers, parents, students—and a consequent readiness to open their minds to new ideas. If so, and if this book can contribute something to a more widespread discussion of the issues we argued about at Aspen and Berlin, we should not despair of seeing changes take place, even without waiting for the educational system to agree on and issue new directives.

One of the potentially significant “actions” that has come out of the exchange of ideas at these meetings has been the long-term project of the Aspen Institute entitled “The First 20 Years of Life.” It was elementary that in thinking about “the educated person,” one should focus on the formative years; during which the individual is shaped by family, school, work, and community to be a contributing and functioning member of society. That connection has been made at the Aspen Institute, and “The First 20 Years of Life,” which is now launched, is one result.

I have one final note to add. The two seminars of which this book is a product were made possible only by the cooperation of many people with the Aspen Institute in funding and organizing them. Our acknowledgments and thanks for this support are expressed in the appropriate place. However, none of those involved will take offense, I am sure, if I make an exception by mentioning here that no two people contributed more to the quality of the discussion at Aspen than Lionel and Diana Trilling.

Both were candid in expressing their disappointment with the results, but I hope that Lionel Trilling (whom I saw there for the last time before he died) had some idea of how vividly he represented for most of us the embodiment of that humanistic ideal in education of which he spoke so eloquently.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The background work and seminars that formed the greenhouse for this volume were extensive. As a result this book is, in a sense, a record of the ideas of intellectuals. Their ideas vary and are often in dispute, but they seldom fail to stimulate and arouse the reader to think freshly.

These conferences were exceptional in a second sense. They were not as broadly representative as most Aspen Institute meetings in achieving the Institute's goal of bringing together thoughtful individuals from all sectors of society worldwide. Since the meetings were held during the preoccupation with the Watergate affair, some members from government, business, and the press were unable to attend. This undoubtedly resulted in omitting certain spices from the mix, but it certainly did highlight discussion among intellectuals.

The events that led to this volume involved the energy and intelligence of countless people whose assistance we wish to acknowledge. Here we can mention only a few of them, hoping that our further thanks for such generosity of time and insight can be warmly inferred.

We thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for helping to make the first seminar possible. The participants in the seminars on which this volume is based have our unbounded appreciation. Special thanks are due to Lord Bullock, without whose efforts these conferences and this book could not have been achieved, and to Stephen Graubard, the cochairman of the seminar at Aspen, Colorado. They both gave a great deal of time and talent. To Joseph E. Slater, president of the Aspen Institute, our gratitude for seeing the usefulness of this project from the start and for relating it to the future work of the Aspen Institute, especially the projects "The First 20 Years of Life" and "Literacy in the Arts and Sciences." John Hunt, then vice-president of the Aspen Institute, deserves credit for mounting these seminars and shaping their agendas. The leadership of Shepard Stone and the valuable work of Aspen Institute Berlin helped to advance the project considerably. Francis Keppel provided the continuing encouragement and resources that made the translation from seminars to book a possibility. We also thank the staff of the

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