

“To produce a new stratum of intellectuals”

By Antonio Gramsci

IT IS NOT ENTIRELY true that “instruction” is something quite different from “education”. An excessive emphasis on this distinction has been a serious error of idealist educationalists and its effects can already be seen in the school system as they have reorganised it. For instruction to be wholly distinct from education, the pupil would have to be pure passivity, a “mechanical receiver” of abstract notions — which is absurd...

In the school, the nexus between instruction and education can only be realised by the living work of the teacher. For this he must be aware of the contrast between the type of culture and society which he represents and the type of culture and society represented by his pupils... If the teaching body is not adequate and the nexus between instruction and education is dissolved, while the problem of teaching is conjured away by cardboard schemata exalting educativity, the teacher's work will as a result become yet more inadequate. We will have rhetorical schools, quite unserious, because the material solidity of what is “certain” will be missing and what is “true” will be a truth only of words: that is to say, precisely, rhetoric.

This degeneration is even clearer in the secondary school, in the literature and philosophy syllabus. Previously, the pupils at least acquired a certain “baggage” or “equipment” (according to taste) of concrete facts. Now... the pupil does not bother with concrete facts and fills his head with formulae and words which usually mean nothing to him and which are forgotten at once. It was right to struggle against the old school, but reforming it was not as simple as it seemed. The problem was not one of model curricula but of men, and not just of the men who are actually teachers themselves but of the entire social complex which they

express... The pupil, if he has an active intelligence, will give an order of his own, with the aid of his social background, to the “baggage” he accumulates. With the new curricula, which coincide with a general lowering of the level of the teaching profession, there will no longer be any “baggage” to put in order...

The traditional school was oligarchic because it was intended for the new generation of the ruling class, destined to rule in its turn: but... it is not the fact that pupils learn to rule there, nor the fact that it tends to produce gifted men, which gives a particular type of school its social character. This social character is determined by the fact that each social group has its own type of school, intended to perpetuate a specific traditional function, ruling or subordinate. If one wishes to break this pattern one needs, instead of multiplying and grading different types of vocational school, to create a single type of formative school (primary-secondary) which would take the child up to the threshold of his choice of job, forming him during this time as a person capable of thinking, studying, and ruling — or controlling those who rule...

It will be necessary to resist the tendency to render easy that which cannot become easy without being distorted. If our aim is to produce a new stratum of intellectuals, including those capable of the highest degree of specialisation, from a social group which has not traditionally developed the appropriate attitudes, then we have unprecedented difficulties to overcome.

* From Antonio Gramsci, “Prison Notebooks”, pp.35-43. Gramsci was writing (in the prison where he, as a leader of the Italian Communist Party, had been put by Mussolini's fascist regime — and therefore in sometimes coded language) about the “progressive” educational reforms of the fascist government in Italy, and their relation to the traditional school.