

# Prospects For Conservatives

## Part II: Cultivating Educational Wastelands

By Russell Kirk

With some trepidation I commence my remarks on this large subject, the lot of educational reformers being hard. In 1953, Professor Arthur Bestor published a book entitled *Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Our Public Schools*. There survives a Jewish tradition that all the Prophets were stoned to death or otherwise slain by the People. From 1953 onward, the Educationists belabored Dr. Bestor with epithets, until he departed from this world. And the Educationists' retreat from learning has continued with few impediments.

In my preceding lecture of this series about Prospects for Conservatives, entitled "Prospects Abroad," I ventured to suggest the possibility of an Augustan Age for the United States and for the twenty-first-century world — supposing we Americans do not endeavor to impose our ways upon all the peoples of the earth. But in discussing American education, I cannot be so sanguine.

Marxist educational notions and methods have been exposed as grim fallacies — except in these United States, perhaps. Yet what are we to say of present American educational notions and methods? Ever since the publishing of the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, "A Nation at Risk," seven years ago, a great deal of talk about education, and scribbling about it, have occurred. As for any evidences of general improvement, however — why, one does not discover them easily.

The United States now is the great power in the world. Nevertheless, who can praise an educational system that turns out young people marvelously ignorant — except for a very small minority — of history, geography, and foreign languages, and so, unfitted to have much of anything to do with concerns larger than those of their own neighborhood? Worse still, what future have a people whose schooling has enabled them, at best, to ascertain the price of everything — but the value of nothing? We Americans stand today politically dominant, intellectually enfeebled. Conservatives have before them a complex work of intellectual restoration.

**Plight and Possibilities.** Nowadays nearly everybody — except for the National Education Association's bosses and affiliates, and the professors at most schools of education — confesses that something is badly wrong with learning in America. While we linger in a mood of remorse and recrimination, opportunity exists for genuine reform. Permit me to address you first, and basically, on the plight and possibilities of the higher learning.

For half a century, our higher education has been sinking lower. Nobody is more painfully aware of this decay than is the conscientious professor of some experience, and nobody suffers more from it than does the perceptive undergraduate. America's higher learning lies

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in a state of decadence. But eras of decadence sometimes are succeeded by eras of renewal. It is all a matter of will, reason, and imagination. As Samuel Johnson put it, "Why, sir, we *know* the will is free; and there's an end to it."

**Higher Education's Mission.** Conceivably we Americans, after decades of blundering and incertitude, may be entering upon an American Augustan Age. For successful healing, candid diagnosis is required. The people of the United States now spend annually upon higher education more money, probably, than did all the nations of the world combined, probably, from the foundation of the ancient universities down to the beginning of World War II. Yet there prevails a widespread discontent at the results produced by this costly endeavor. Surely it is time for us conservatives to examine afresh the mission of the higher education.

The primary end of the higher learning, in all lands and all times, has been what John Henry Newman called the training of the intellect to form a philosophical habit of mind. College and university were founded to develop right reason and imagination, for the sake of the person and of the republic. By its nature, the higher education is concerned with abstractions — rather difficult abstractions, both in the sciences and in humane studies. In any age, most people are not fond of abstractions. In this democratic milieu, therefore, higher education stands in danger everywhere from levelling pressures.

In Britain, a very few years ago, the member of the opposition party who had been designated minister of education in a prospective Labour government denounced Oxford and Cambridge universities as "cancers." Presumably he would have converted those ancient institutions, if given his way, into something like the Swedish "people's universities" — that is, lax institutions at which every lad and lass can succeed, because all standards for entrance or graduation have been swept away. Every man and woman an intellectual king or queen, with an Oxbridge degree. The trouble with this aspiration is that those kings and queens would be intellectually impoverished — and presumably Britain generally would be impoverished in more ways than one.

Recently we have heard similar voices in the graduate schools of Harvard. Why discriminate against indolence and stupidity? Why not let everybody graduate, regardless of performance in studies? Would not that be the democratic way? If young people do not care for abstractions, and manifest a positive aversion to developing a philosophical habit of mind, why not give them what they think they would like: that is, the superficial counter-culture?

**Lowering of Standards.** The educational degradation of the democratic dogma already has prevailed, with few exceptions, throughout the western world: it has gone far in France and Italy. In the United States, ever since World War II, the lowering of standards for admission and for graduation, the notorious disgrace of "grade inflation," and the loss of order and integration in curricula, are too widely known and regretted for me to need to labor these afflictions here. Some cold comfort may be found in the fact that we have not sinned more greatly than have other nations of the West — somewhat less, indeed.

Here and there, some signs of renewal in higher education may be discerned; certainly we hear much pother about it. But it remains to be determined whether it is possible to restore or improve the true higher learning, what with powerful political and economic pressures against improvement. Being somewhat gloomy by conviction, yet sanguine by temperament, I may mutter to myself, "Say not the struggle naught availeth!"

Why are this lowering of standards and this loss of intellectual coherence ruinous to higher education? Because the higher learning is intended to develop, primarily, a

philosophical habit of mind. The genuine higher education is not meant, really, to “create jobs” or to train technicians. Incidentally, the higher education does tend to have such results, too; but only as by-products. We stand in danger of forgetting, during our pursuit of the incidentals, the fundamental aims of learning.

Why were colleges and universities established, and what remains their most valuable function? To discipline the mind; to give men and women long views and to instill in them the virtue of prudence; to present a coherent body of ordered knowledge, in several great fields; to pursue that knowledge for its own sake; to help the rising generation to make its way toward wisdom and virtue. The college is an instrument to teach that truth is better than falsehood, and wisdom better than ignorance. Of course the college has done other things as well, some of them mildly baneful — such as serving as an instrument of social snobbery. But I am speaking still of the college’s fundamental mission.

The college is intended to confer two sorts of benefits. The first sort of benefit is the improvement of the human person, for the individual’s own sake: opening the way to some wisdom to young men and women, that there may be something in their lives besides getting and spending.

**Essential to Society.** The second kind of benefit is the preservation and advancement of society, by developing a body or class of young people who will be leaders in many walks of life: scientists, clergymen, political officials or representative officers, physicians, lawyers, teachers, industrialists, managers, and all the rest. The college is a means to help to form intellects, assure their competence, and (a point often forgotten today) to help to form their characters. Here I am not speaking of an elite, for I share T.S. Eliot’s conviction that a deliberately-cultivated series of elites would tend toward narrowness and arrogance. Rather, I refer to a fairly broad and numerous class of tolerably educated men and women who would leaven the lump of society in a wide variety of ways. Most of them never would be famous, or powerful on a large scale; but they form that body of well-schooled people essential to any modern society, and especially important to a democratic society.

Now a higher schooling merely technological and skill-oriented — what once would have been called a mechanical education, as opposed to a liberal education — can neither impart wisdom to the person nor supply intellectual and moral leadership to the republic. I do not object to learning a trade — far from it. But a trade is best learnt through apprenticeship, internship, on-the-job training, or technical schools. Except for the learned professions, learning a trade is ill suited to a college campus. If we convert higher education into technical training merely, we may find ourselves living in what Irving Babbitt called “a devil’s sabbath of whirling machinery.” For if the philosophical habit of mind is developed nowhere, “the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

Let me descend to particulars. The biggest fad in education today is the movement styled the Information Revolution. An extensive jargon is developing to serve this revolution’s uses. The revolution is supposed to usher in an Informational Society; we even are told that this Informational Society will supplant the Knowledge Society. One of the grave faults of American schooling at every level is the eagerness to embrace the newest gadget — mechanical or intellectual — at the expense of the tested tools of learning. The apologists for television used to tell us that their darling has molded the minds of “the best informed generation in the history of America.” Also, if we are to believe the report “A Nation at Risk,” it has molded the minds of the most ignorant generation in America.

**For information is not knowledge; and knowledge is not wisdom. This is movingly expressed by T.S. Eliot in some lines of his choruses for *The Rock*:**

**The endless cycle of idea and action,  
Endless invention, endless experiment,  
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;  
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;  
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.  
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,  
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,  
But nearness to death no nearer to God.  
Where is the Life we have lost in living?  
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?  
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries  
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.**

**Aye, where is the knowledge we have lost in information, not to mention the wisdom? What college and university used to endeavor to impart was not miscellaneous information, a random accumulation of facts, but instead an integrated and ordered body of knowledge that would develop the philosophical habit of mind – from which cast of mind one might find the way to wisdom of many sorts.**

**Doubtless the prevalence of computers may confer upon us various material benefits. But so far as genuine education goes, the computer and its Informational Society may amount to a blight. They seem calculated to enfeeble the individual reason and to make most of us dependent upon an elite of computer programmers – at the higher lever of the Informational Society, I mean; they may develop into vigorous enemies of the philosophical habit of mind.**

**Technological Flotsam.** One thing to remember, then, in discussing what higher education should do for people in the dawning years, is that waves of technological innovation commonly carry on their crests a mass of flotsam. Such a disagreeable mass was flung upon the beaches of academe by the ideological tempests of the 1960s and 1970s. At university and college we are only beginning to recover from the damage done to the philosophical habit of mind by that storm. The gentlefolk and scholars of the Academy would be highly imprudent if they should assist in fresh devastation by setting gadgetry above intellectual discipline.

**I am arguing that educational neoterism does mischief often. Nor do I believe it to be the primary function of university and college to create a kind of tapioca-pudding society in which everybody would be just like everybody else – every young man and woman, ideally, possessed of a doctoral degree, if innocent of philosophy.**

**Instead, the primary mission of university and college is to point the way toward some measure of wisdom and virtue, through developing the philosophical habit of mind. I am saying that universities and colleges were founded in the hope that those institutions might help the rising generation toward two forms of order: one, order in the soul of the person, the direction of will and appetite by reason; the other, order in the commonwealth, through the understanding of justice and freedom and the public good. I am arguing that our basic reform of the higher learning must be the restoration of these venerable aims – a task for conservatives.**

**Is it absurd to imagine that our vast factory-like campuses might be humanized? Is it ridiculous to argue that the American obsession with getting and spending could be chastened sufficiently to permit American higher learning to be sought for its own sake? Perhaps; but perhaps not, too.**

**I lack time to offer you a detailed program of educational reformation. But I venture now to suggest the essential measure that must be undertaken if we are to move from intellectual decadence toward intellectual renewal.**

**First, the quality of American primary and secondary schooling must be mightily improved before there can be any very marked increase of intelligence and imagination among college and university students. This improvement must have two aspects: the teaching of true intellectual disciplines, and the rousing of the moral imagination. Despite endeavors of the federal Department of Education to entice schools into improving themselves, little has occurred as yet in the way of practical reform.**

**I find it highly doubtful that any marked reformation of the public schools can occur until the several states, and perhaps the federal government too, adopt some form of the "voucher plan," which would provide for much greater diversity and choice in schooling. Here I commend to you, ladies and gentlemen, the new book by John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Brookings Institution). As Mr. Chubb puts it, "The public education system functions naturally and routinely, despite everybody's best intentions, to burden schools with excessive bureaucracy, to discourage effective school organization, and to stifle student achievement."**

**Second, the American appetite for requiring vocational certification must be curbed. A very great part of the student body on nearly all campuses is enrolled mostly because "you have to get a degree to get a job." Thus universities and colleges are crowded with young people who would prefer to be somewhere else, earning money or at least active and emancipated from abstractions. It needs to be remembered that universities and colleges are centers for the study of abstractions; and most people's interest in abstractions is distinctly limited. Many of the skills in business, industry, technology, and governmental service are best acquired by internship or apprenticeship; being compelled to linger in college is little better than marking time for many undergraduates. Were universities and colleges relieved of the responsibility for turning out half-finished candidates for routine employment, they could undertake their primary duties so much the better; and the whole atmosphere of the typical campus would grow far more cheerful.**

**Third, the humane scale in learning should be regained by creating no more mass campuses with many thousands of undergraduates in a lonely crowd, and decentralizing so far as possible the existing Behemoth campuses. The old collegiate structure of the academic community should become the model once more. Institutes for technical training, as distinct from the abstractions with which higher education is supposed to be concerned, should be situated elsewhere than on the same campus with college or university.**

**Fourth, curricula at nearly all universities and colleges should be greatly revised, rigorously, so as to provide students with a genuine intellectual discipline, purged of the intellectual boondoggles that have disgraced college programs to some extent ever since the beginning of this century, but especially since the late Sixties. At the majority of American establishments of a learning allegedly higher, theoretical sciences and imaginative humane studies have been pushed into a dusty corner of the curriculum; that folly must be undone. Reading through directories of colleges recently, with a view to finding a good college for our third daughter, I discovered that at the typical college nowadays only some five percent**

of the undergraduates are enrolled in “letters,” which once upon a time was the American college’s principal discipline. If the rising generation’s more intelligent members have acquired little knowledge of great literature, history, languages, and the natural sciences — why, the person and the republic will fall into disorder, soon or late.

Fifth, we must emphasize through the whole of higher education the ancient principle that the ends of all education are wisdom and virtue. I do *not* mean that the purpose of the higher learning is to “impart values.” The whole notion of teaching “values” is mistaken, although held often by sincere people who mean well.

For what true education attempts to impart is *meaning*, not value. This sly employment of the word *value* as a substitute for such words as “norm,” “standard,” “principle,” and “truth” is the deliberate work of the doctrinaire positivists, who deny that there exists any moral significance of a transcendent or an abiding character. In America, the notion of educational “values” has been advanced by sociologists and educationists of the Instrumentalist school: it is intended as a substitute for the religious assumptions about human existence that formerly were taken for granted in schools. A “value,” as educationists employ the word, is a personal preference, gratifying perhaps to the person who holds it, but of no binding moral effect upon others. “Other things being equal, pushpin is as good as poetry,” in Bentham’s famous phrase. Choose what values you will, or ignore them all: it’s a matter of what gives you, the individual, the most pleasure and the least pain.

Etienne Gilson points out that positivists deliberately advance the concept of “values” because they deny that words, or the concepts represented by words, have real meaning. Thus the word “honor” may hold value for some, but may be repellent to other people: in the view of the positivist, the word “honor” is meaningless, for there is no honor, nor yet dishonor: all really is physical sensation, pleasurable or painful. But if “honor” has an illusory value for you, employ it; if you dislike “honor,” discard it.

**Imparting A Moral Heritage.** Time was when every school child used to be familiar with the catalogue of the seven cardinal virtues and the seven deadly sins. The positivists and a good many other folk today deny the existence of those seven deadly sins, or of any other sin. As for the virtues — why, they would like to convert those back into “value preferences,” with no moral imperative to back them. But justice, fortitude, prudence, and temperance are not “values” merely; nor are faith, hope, and charity. It is not for the individual, bound up in self-conceit, to determine whether he prefers justice or injustice; it is not for him to decide whether prudence or imprudence suits him better. True, the individual may so decide and act, to others’ harm or his own. But it is the function of education to impart a moral heritage: to teach that the virtues and the vices are real, and that the individual is not free to toy with the sins as he may choose.

What true education transmits is not values, but instead a body of truth: that is, a pattern of meanings, perceived through certain disciplines of the intellect. The sort of education that prevailed in Europe and America until about 1930, say, was an endeavor to instruct the rising generation in the nature of reality. It traced a pattern of order: order in the soul, order in the commonwealth. That old system of education began with information; it passed from information to knowledge; it moved from knowledge to wisdom. Its aim, I repeat, was not value, but truth.

The Benthamite and Deweyite educational structure of our day, little concerned with meaning, aims confusedly at personal advancement, technical training, sociability, socialization, custodial functions, and certification — not to mention fun and games. The

very possibility of ascertaining the meaning of anything is denied by many a department of philosophy. What does this twentieth-century educational system transmit to the rising generation? Chiefly certain technical and commercial skills, together with that training in the learned professions that is indispensable to our civilization. Modern schooling, at any level, offers little toward the ordering of the soul and the ordering of the commonwealth.

We Americans possess the riches and the power that could give us an American Augustan Age. Do we possess mind and heart requisite for an Augustan era? It has been said that the Americans of our time know the price of everything and the value of nothing; it might better be said that they know the price of everything, the value of some things — and the meaning of next to nothing. We have not schooled ourselves, this past half-century and more, for Augustan responsibilities.

**Fading Heritage.** So far as we remembered our heritage of culture at all, most of us Americans assumed that somehow it would endure automatically, unregarded and unrenewed — a form of perpetual motion. But that heritage has been fading among us for several decades. In educational fad and foible, in arid specialization, in mere processes of certification for potential employment, we have laid waste our inheritance of reason and imagination.

Having failed to apprehend meanings, we are forced back upon a rude pragmatism in private life and in public a groping for “what works” — or seems to work. In private existence, such servility to the evanescent moment leads to the alienist’s couch and the divorce court; in the affairs of nations, such naive improvisations may end in ruinous blunders, not to be undone.

The education of yesteryear was founded upon certain postulates. One of these was that much truth is ascertainable; another, that religious truth is the source of all good; a third, that we may profit by the wisdom of our ancestors; a fourth, that the individual is foolish, but the species is wise; a fifth, that wisdom is sought for its own sake; a sixth, that for the sake of the commonwealth, schooling should quicken the moral imagination.

These postulates have not ceased to be true; it is only that they have been forgotten in our century’s obsession with power and money, and our century’s illusion that ideology is a ready and satisfactory substitute for thought. Some eyes have been opened to the mischief done by that obsession and that illusion. Here and there, some attempts at recovery of the true ends of education are being made.

**Winning Back the Inheritance.** Many in America and throughout the world have been disinherited of their cultural patrimony. Yet they may win back that inheritance, if they have fortitude and tenacity sufficient. “The dead alone give us energy,” we are told by Gustave Le Bon. In the long run, the man and the state that have rejected the legacy from many centuries will be found nerveless. And the man or woman who has sought out that intellectual legacy will be emboldened to defend the Permanent Things Against Chaos and Old Night.

My old comrade in arms Arthur Bestor found the schools of America in 1953 educational wastelands; they are no less arid today. Yet say not, ladies and gentlemen, that the struggle naught availeth. Some conservative irrigation conceivably may cause the desert to bloom. If nothing is done — why, hand in hand with the Hollow Men, we go round and round the prickly pear at five o’clock in the morning.

**This is the dead land  
This is cactus land  
Here the stone images  
Are raised, here they receive  
The supplication of a dead man's hand  
Under the twinkle of a fading star.**

**Unless conservatives act intellectually and vigorously to renew right reason and imagination among us, by the conclusion of the twentieth century America may be an egalitarian wasteland of mind and spirit, with everybody compulsorily schooled, and everybody equal in ignorance.**

