

icans. For levels of sensibility are, in fact, largely acquired, by atmosphere and by training.

Moreover, these means of entertainment have become so continuously and so unavoidably available that the effort involved to cultivate and to gratify individual tastes is simply too great to be widely expected. In order really to allow a choice between genuine leisure and the spurious leisure that now prevails, the commercial producers who now hold the field would at least temporarily have to be put out of business.

VI

It has not been my purpose this afternoon to give angry, confident answers to the so-called problems of leisure in America. For surely, in our situation, it is more fruitful to ask the right questions than to provide the half answers now available to us.

What I have asked is whether, properly conceived, there is any special problem of leisure?

For is not any life worth living as life in which both work and leisure are but phases of one meaningful whole, a life which is largely composed of truly independent domains of experience, a life in which the mass means of distraction are not felt to be necessary?

The so-called problem of leisure, in short, is the problem of how we can heighten the qualities of experience in all areas of American life to such an extent that there will be no problem of leisure.

1953

MASS SOCIETY AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

The transformation of a community of publics into a mass society is one of the keys to the meaning of modern life. It is a structural trend that leads directly to many of the psychological and political problems that Americans, especially those concerned with liberal education, now confront. In every industrial society, these problems are of national relevance, and in each of them the trend is rooted in the nation as a set of metropolitan areas. For it is from such metropolitan centers that there has spread those forces that are destroying or minimizing the classic liberal public and making for the ascendancy of the mass society.

I

The United States today is not altogether a mass society, and it has never been altogether a community of publics. These phrases are names for extreme types. Although they point to certain features of reality, they are themselves constructions. Social reality is always, or so it seems to me, some sort of mixture. But the point is that one can most readily understand just how much of what is mixed into it, if one first states, in terms of explicit dimensions, the clear-cut and extreme types.

At least four dimensions must be attended to if we are to understand the differences between public and mass: (a) There is first, the ratio of the givers of opinion to its receivers, which is, I think, the simplest way to state the key meaning of the formal media of communication. More than anything else, it is the shift in this ratio which is central to the problems of the public and of public opinion in

latter-day phases of democracy.¹ (b) There is second, the organization of communication, of which the most decisive aspect is the possibility of answering back an opinion without internal or external reprisals being taken.² (c) Third, there is the ease with which opinion is effective in the shaping of decisions of powerful consequence. This opportunity for people to act out their opinions collectively is of course limited by their positions in the structure of power.³ (d) Fourth, there is the degree to which instituted authorities, with their sanctions and controls, infiltrate the public. Here, the key problem becomes the degree of genuine autonomy from instituted authority which the public has.⁴

By combining these dimensions, it is possible to construct

¹ At one extreme on the scale of communication two people talk personally with one another; at the other extreme, one spokesman talks impersonally through a communications net to millions of hearers and viewers. In between these two extremes, there are assemblages and political rallies, parliamentary sessions, law court debates, small discussion circles dominated by one man, open discussion circles with talk moving freely back and forth among fifty people, and so on.

² Three conditions set the organization of communication: first, technical conditions of the means of communication, in imposing a lower ratio of speakers to listeners, may obviate the possibility of freely answering back. Second, informal rules, resting upon conventional sanction and upon the informal structure of opinion leadership, may govern who can speak, when, and for how long. Such rules may or may not be in congruence with, third, formal rules, with institutional sanction, which govern the communication process. In the extreme case, we may conceive of an absolute monopoly of communication to pacified media groups whose members cannot answer back even "in private." At the opposite extreme, the conditions may allow and the rules may uphold the wide and symmetrical formation of opinion.

³ This structure may be such as to limit decisively this capacity, or it may allow or even invite it. The structure may confine it to local areas or enlarge its area of opportunity; may make it intermittent or more or less continuous.

⁴ At one extreme, no agent of the formal system of authority moves among the autonomous public. At the other extreme, the public becomes a mass terrorized into uniformity by the infiltration of informers and the universalization of suspicion. One thinks of the late Nazi street and block system, the eighteenth century Japanese kumi, the Soviet cell structure. In the end, the formal structure of power coincides, as it were, with the informal ebb and flow of influence by discussion, which is thus killed off.

models of publics and diagrams of the societies with which they seem congruent. Since "the problem of public opinion" is now set by the eclipse of the classic bourgeois public," we are here concerned with only two types:⁵

In a *public* as I understand the term, virtually as many people express opinions as receive them; public communications are so organized that there is a chance immediately and effectively to answer back to any opinion expressed in public. Opinion formed by such discussion readily finds an outlet in effective action against, if necessary, prevailing systems and agents of authority, and authoritative institutions do not interpenetrate the public, which is thus more or less autonomous in its operations. When these conditions prevail, we have the working model of a community of publics, and this model, as we shall presently see, fits pretty closely the several assumptions of classic democratic theory.

At the opposite extreme, in a *mass*, far fewer people express opinions than receive them; for the community of publics becomes an abstracted collectivity of individuals who receive impressions from the mass media. The communications that prevail are so organized that it is difficult or impossible for the individual to answer back immediately or with any effect. The realization of opinion in action is controlled by authorities who organize channels for such action. The mass has no autonomy from institutions; on the contrary, agents of authorized institutions interpenetrate this mass, reducing any autonomy it may have in the formation of opinion by discussion.

The public and the mass may be most readily distinguished by their dominant modes of communications: in a community of publics, discussion is the ascendant mode of communication, and the mass media, if they exist, simply enlarge and animate discussion, linking one *primary public* with the discussions of another. In a mass society, the dominant type of communication is by the formal media and the publics become *media markets*, by which I mean all those exposed to the contents of given mass media.

⁵ I shall not here consider a type of "public" which might be called *conventional consensus*, and which is a feature of traditional societies in which there is no idea of public opinion as it has arisen in the modern, western world.

Let us pause for a moment and consider generously the classic public of democratic theory, in the spirit in which Rousseau once cried: "Opinion, Queen of the World, is not subject to the power of kings; they are themselves its first slaves."

The key feature of public opinion which the rise of the democratic middle classes initiates is the free ebb and flow of discussion. In this community of publics anyone who would speak, can and anyone who is interested, does. The possibilities of answering back, of organizing autonomous organs of public opinion, of realizing opinion in action, are automatically established by democratic institutions. For the public opinion that results from discussion is understood to be a resolution that is to be carried out by public action; it is, in one version, the "general will" of the people, which parliament or Congress enacts into law, thus lending to it institutional force. Parliament, as an institution, crowns all the primary publics; it is the archetype for each of the scattered little circles of face-to-face citizens discussing their public business.

This eighteenth-century idea of public opinion parallels the economic idea of the free market economy. Here is the public, composed of discussing circles of opinion, peers crowned by parliament; there is the market composed of freely competing entrepreneurs. As price is the result of anonymous, equally-weighted, bargaining individuals, so is the public of public opinion the result of each man having thought things out for himself and contributing his weight to the great formation. To be sure, some might have more influence on the state of opinion than others, but no one man or group monopolizes the discussion, or by himself determines the state of opinion that prevails.

Innumerable discussion circles are knit together by mobile people who carry opinions, and struggle for the power of larger command. The public is thus organized into associations and parties, each representing a viewpoint, each trying to acquire a place in parliament or Congress, where the discussion continues. The autonomy of these discussion circles is a key element in the idea of "public opinion" as

a democratic legitimation. The opinions formed are actively realized within the prevailing institutions of power; and all authoritative agents are made or broken by the prevailing opinions of primary publics.

Insofar as the public is frustrated in realizing its demands upon its agents, it may come to question the symbols of authority to which it has been devoted. Such questioning is of course of a deeper order than criticism of specific policies, but new political parties, of left or right, may attempt in their agitation to use the discussion of specific policies in order to bring the legitimations themselves into question. So, out of the little circles of people talking with one another, the large forces of social movements and political parties develop; and the discussion of opinion is the phase in a total act by which public affairs are conducted.

So conceived, the public is the loom of classic, eighteenth-century democracy; discussion is at once the thread and the shuttle tying the discussion circles together. It lies at the basis of the conception of authority by discussion, based on the hope that truth and justice will somehow carve out of society a great apparatus of free discussion. The people are presented with problems. They discuss them. They decide on them. They formulate viewpoints. These viewpoints are organized, and they compete. One viewpoint "wins out." Then the people act out this view, or their representatives are instructed to act it out, and this they promptly do.

Such are the images of classic democracy which are still used as the working legitimations of power in American society. You will recognize this description as a set of images out of a fairy tale; they are not adequate even as an approximate model of how this society works.

In our situation of half-mass and half-public, the term public, in fact, has come to have a specialized meaning, which dramatically reveals its eclipse. From the standpoint of the public actor—the democratic politician, for example—some people who clamor publicly can be identified as "Labor" and others as "Business," and still others as "Farm." Those who cannot readily be so identified make up the "Public." In this usage, "the public" is composed of the unidentified and nonpartisan in the world of defined

and partisan interests. It is socially composed of well-educated salaried professionals, especially college professors, of nonunionized employees, especially white-collar people, along with non-employing, self-employed professionals and small businessmen.

In this faint-echo of the classic notion, the public consists of those remnants of the middle classes, old and new, whose interests are not explicitly defined, organized, or clamorous. In a curious adaptation, "the public" often becomes, in fact, "the unattached expert," who, although well informed, has never taken a clear-cut, public stand on those controversial issues which are brought to a focus by organized interests. What the public stands for, accordingly, is often a vagueness of policy (called open-mindedness), a lack of involvement in public affairs (known as reasonableness), and a professional disinterest (often known as tolerance).

Some members of such official publics, as in the field of labor-management mediation, start out very young and make a career out of being careful to be informed but never to take a strong position; and there are many others, quite unofficial, who take such professionals as a sort of model. The only trouble is that they are acting as if they were disinterested judges but they do not have the power of judges. Hence their reasonableness, tolerance and openmindedness do not often count for much in the shaping of human affairs.

From almost any angle of vision that we might assume, when we look upon the community of publics, we realize that we have moved a considerable distance along the road to the mass society. At the end of that road there is totalitarianism, as in Nazi Germany or in Communist Russia. We are not yet at that end; in the United States today, media markets are not entirely ascendant over primary publics. But surely we can see that the success of the demagogue in exploiting these media, and the decreased chance to answer back, is certainly more a feature of a mass society than of a community of publics. And there are many other signs.

What is happening might again be stated in terms of the historical parallel between the commodity market in the

economic order and in the public of public opinion. In brief, there is a movement from widely scattered little powers to concentrated powers and the attempt at monopoly control from powerful centers. And in the centers of economics, of politics, and of opinion, power is partially hidden; they are centers of manipulation as well as of authority. The small shop serving a small neighborhood is replaced by the anonymity of the national corporation; mass advertisement replaces the personal influence of opinion between merchant and customer. The political leader hooks up his speech to a national network and speaks, with appropriate personal touches, to a million people he never saw and never will see.

Entire brackets of professions and industries are in the "opinion business," impersonally manipulating the public for hire. *In the primary public*, the competition of opinions goes on between people holding views in the service of their interests and their reasoning. *But in the mass society* of media markets, competition, if any, goes on between the crowd of manipulators with their mass media on the one hand, and the people receiving their propaganda on the other.

Under such conditions, it is not surprising that a conception of public opinion as a mere impression or as a reaction—we cannot say "response"—to the content of the mass media should arise. In this view, the public is merely the collectivity of individuals each rather passively exposed to the mass media and rather helplessly opened up to the suggestions and manipulations that flow from these media. The fact of manipulation from centralized points of control constitutes, as it were, an expropriation of the information and change of opinion participated in by the old multitude of little opinion producers and consumers operating in a free and balanced market.

III

In attempting to explain the ascendancy of mass over public, there are four major trends to which we should pay attention; for if we do not we shall not be able to speculate fruitfully about the task of the college for adults in the metropolitan society of masses. These four structural trends

of our epoch seem to me to coincide in their effects; they transform public into mass.

(i). The rise of bureaucratic structures of executive power, in the economic, the military, and the political orders, has lowered the effective use of all these smaller voluntary associations operating between the state and the economy on the one hand, and the family on the other. It is not only that the institutions of power have become large-scale and inaccessibly centralized; they have at the same time become less political and more administrative. It is within this great change of framework that the organized public has waned.

In terms of *scale*, the transformation of public into mass has been underpinned by the shift from a political public decisively restricted in size (by property and education, as well as by sex and age) to a greatly enlarged mass having only the qualifications of citizenship and age. In terms of *organization*, the transformation has been underpinned by the shift from the individual and his primary community to the voluntary association and the mass party as the major units of organized power.

Voluntary associations have become larger to the extent that they have become effective; and to the extent that they have become effective, they have become inaccessible to the individual who would participate by discussion in their policies. Accordingly, along with older institutions, these voluntary associations have lost their grip on the individual. As greater numbers of people are drawn into the political arena, these associations become mass in scale, and because of the increased scale of the power structure, the power of the individual becomes more dependent upon these mass associations, and yet these are less accessible to his influence.⁶

Elections become first (1) contests between two giant and unwieldy parties, neither of which the individual can

⁶ At the same time—and also because of the metropolitan segregation and distraction, which I shall discuss in a moment—the individual becomes more dependent upon the means of mass communication for his view of the structure as a whole.

truly feel that he influences, and neither of which is capable of winning psychologically impressive majorities. Second (2), more and more, elections are decided in the irrational terms of silly appeals; less and less on clear and simple statements of genuine issue. Certainly the techniques of advertisement, and their use in the mass persuasion of an electorate, becomes more important than rational argument over real issues in public. And, in all this, the parties are of the same general form as other mass associations.⁷

What is not available is the association which has three characteristics: the association that is at once (1) a context in which reasonable opinions may be reached, (2) an agency by which reasonable activities may be undertaken and (3) a powerful enough unit, in comparison with other organizations of power, to make a difference. Now the primary publics are either so small as to be swamped, and hence give up; or so large as to be merely another unit of the general distant structure of power, and hence inaccessible. And in either case they are the more readily subjected to distorted images of the world by the mass media.

(ii). As the scale of institutions has become larger and more centralized, so have the range and intensity of the opinion makers' efforts. For the means of opinion-making—and this is the second master trend—have paralleled in range and efficiency the other institutions of greater scale that make up the modern society of masses. There is universal compulsory education—the seed-bed of nationalist propaganda and white-collar skills—and there are the media of mass communication. These mass media have apparently great variety and competition, but each of them often seems to be competing in terms of variations of a few standardized themes; and freedom of effective opinion seems

⁷ Well might E. H. Carr conclude: "To speak today of the defense of democracy as if we were defending something which we knew and had possessed for many decades or many centuries is self-deception and sham—mass democracy is a new phenomenon—a creation of the last half-century—which it is inappropriate and misleading to consider in terms of the philosophy of Locke or of the liberal democracy of the nineteenth century. We should be nearer the mark, and should have a far more convincing slogan, if we spoke of the need, not to defend democracy, but to create it." *The New Society*, pp. 75-76.

more and more to operate within and between vested interests, organized and unorganized, that have ready and continual access to the media.

Early observers such as Charles Horton Cooley believed that the increase of the range and volume of the mass media would, as I have said, enlarge and animate the public,⁸ but what it has done has helped kill it off. I do not refer merely to the higher ratio of deliverers of opinion to receivers and to the decreased chance to answer back. Nor do I mean merely the violent banalization and stereotyping of our very sense organs which these media make almost necessary. I have in mind a sort of technological illiteracy, which is expressed in three ways:

a. these media, especially television, have encroached upon the small-scale discussion, upon the leisurely human interchange of opinion.

b. these media do not connect the information on issues that they do provide with the troubles felt by the individual. They do not increase rational insight into tensions, neither those in the individual nor those of the society which are reflected in the individual. On the contrary, they distract attention from such tension. They carry a general tone of animated distraction, a suspended agitation, but it is going nowhere and has nowhere to go: the chief distracting tension of the media is between the wanting and the not having of commodities or of women held to be good looking. As they now generally prevail, the media not only fail as an educational force, they are a malign force—in that they do not reveal to the viewer the sources of his tension and anxiety, his inarticulate resentments and half-formed hopes.

⁸ In Cooley's optimistic view, written before radio and movies, the formal media are understood as simply multiplying the scope and pace of popular discussion. Modern conditions, he writes, "enlarge indefinitely the competition of ideas, and whatever has owed its persistence merely to lack of comparison is likely to go, for that which is really congenial to the choosing mind will be all the more cherished and increased." Still excited by the breakup of local, conventional consensus, he sees the means of communication as furthering the conversational dynamic of classic democracy and with it the growth of rational and free individuality. *Social Organization*, p. 93; see Chapter IX.

c. these media do not enable the individual to transcend the narrow *milieux* in which he lives, or truly connect them with the larger realities of what is happening in the world. On the contrary, they obscure these connections by distracting his attention and fastening it upon artificial frenzies that are resolved within the program framework, usually by violent action, or by what is called humor. In short, for the viewer, not really resolved at all. I shall later return to this point.

(iii). A third explanation for the ascendancy of masses has to do with the class, status and occupational structure of modern society, of which the most important shift in the twentieth century has been the numerical decline of the old middle class of independent entrepreneurs and practitioners, and the rise of the new middle class of dependent white-collar workers.⁹ This change in the economic and social make-up of the middle classes carries two meanings for the transformation of public into mass:

(a) Up until the later nineteenth century, in fact into the Progressive Era, the old middle class acted as an independent base of power, for the individual and for the class. Political freedom and economic security were both anchored in the fact of small-scale independent properties, and these scattered properties, and their holders, were integrated economically by free and autonomous markets, and politically by the process of representative democracy. The white-collar groups are not such an independent base of power: economically, they are in the same situation as propertyless wage workers; politically they are in a worse condition, for they are not organized.

(b) The second meaning of this shift has to do with what is called civic spirit as well as what is called nationalism. Civic spirit is nationalism on a local basis; nationalism is civic spirit written large. At least, the psychological scheme for each is much the same:

⁹ Cf. Mills, *White Collar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951). Roughly, in the last two generations, as proportions of the middle classes as a whole, the old middle class has declined from 85 to 44 per cent; the new middle class has risen from 15 to 56 per cent. See pp. 63 ff.

People in the top levels of the nation or the city voluntarily run various enterprises and push various interests. The underlying population, identifying themselves with these top people, believe these enterprises to be in their interest also, and indeed accept the *identification of these interests with the welfare of the nation or the city as a whole*. Sometimes they are right; sometimes they are wrong; but in either case energetic management by the leaders and cheerful acquiescence of the population are indispensable requirements for the kind of morale known as civic spirit or nationalism.

In any well-run American city, the men and women of the independent middle class have been the traditional chieftains of civic drives and enterprise. For one thing, they usually have the time and money that is needed; at least some of them are fairly well educated. Their work in conducting a small business is said to train them for initiative and responsibility, and does put them in touch with the administrative and political figures of the city, who, in fact, are usually drawn from their circles. In addition, the small businessman often stands to benefit personally as a result of civic improvement: better roads and streets, for example, lead to greater sales for the retail merchant. Mere self-interest often dictates that the businessman should be someone civically. By participating actively in civic affairs, he widens his circle of contacts and customers.

There is no need to stress the point that as the old public rested upon such entrepreneurs, so the decline of the public rests upon the transformation of the middle class into salaried employees, often employees of a local branch of a national corporation.¹⁰ In fact, one thing that is happening in America today is that the structure of such loyalty as was once centered in the city is shifting to the massive corporation.¹¹ In terms of power, this is realistic; in terms of notions of the classic public, it is disastrous.

(iv). A fourth master trend making for a mass society is

¹⁰ C. Wright Mills, "Small Business and Civic Welfare," Senate Document No. 135, 79th Congress, 2nd Session, Washington, 1946.

¹¹ See, e.g., W. H. Whyte, Jr., *Is Anybody Listening?* (Simon & Schuster, 1952).

the rise of the metropolis, and the only point I want to make about it is that the growth of this metropolitan society has segregated men and women into narrowed routines and *milieux*, and it has done so with the constant loss of community structure.

The members of a community of publics know each other more or less fully, because they meet in the several aspects of the total life routine. The members of a metropolitan society of masses know one another only fractionally: as the man who fixes the car, or as that girl who serves your lunch, or as the woman who takes care of your child at school during the day. Pre-judgment and stereotype flourish when people meet people only in this segmental manner. The humanist reality of others does not, cannot, come through.

There are two implications of this I would mention: (a) Just as people tend to select those mass media that confirm what they already believe and enjoy, so do they tend, by the mere fact of segregated *milieux* and routines, to come into touch with those whose opinions are similar to theirs. Others they tend to treat flippantly. In such a situation as the metropolitan society, they develop, in their defense, a blasé manner that reaches deeper than a manner. They do not, accordingly, experience genuine clash of viewpoint or issue. And when they do, they tend to consider it an unpleasantness. (b) They are so sunk in the routines of their *milieux* that they do not transcend, even in discussion, much less by action, these more or less narrow *milieux*. They do not gain a view of the structure of their society and of their role within it. The city is a structure composed of *milieux*; the people in the *milieux* tend to be rather detached from one another; being more or less confined to their own rather narrow ranges, they do not understand the structure of their society. As they reach for each other, they do so by stereotype and through prejudiced images of the creatures of other *milieux*. Each is trapped by his confining circle; each is split from easily identifiable groups. It is for people in such narrow *milieux* that the mass media can create a pseudoworld beyond, and a pseudoworld within, themselves as well.

Publics live in *milieux*, but they can transcend them—individually, by intellect and education; socially, by discussion and by public action. By reflection and debate, and by organized action, a community of publics comes to feel itself, and comes in fact to be active at points of structural relevance. But members of a mass exist in *milieux* and they cannot get out of them, either by mind or by activity, except—in the extreme case—under “the organized spontaneity” of the bureaucrat on a motorcycle. We have not yet reached the extreme case, but observing metropolitan man in the mass we can surely see the psychological preparations for it.

The man in the mass is sunk into stereotyped experience, or even sunk by it; he cannot detach himself in order to observe it, much less to evaluate it. Rather than the internal discussion of reflection, he is often accompanied through his life with only a half conscious monologue. He has no projects of his own; he fulfills the routines that exist. He does not transcend whatever he is at any moment, he does not, he cannot, transcend even his daily *milieux*.

He takes things for granted and makes the best of them. He tries to look ahead, a year or two perhaps, or even longer if he has children or a mortgage, but he does not seriously ask, What do I want? How can I get it? A vague optimism sustains him, broken occasionally by little miseries and disappointments that are soon buried. He is smug, from the standpoint of those who think something might be the matter with the mass style of life in the metropolitan frenzy where self-making is an externally busy branch of industry. By what standards does he judge himself and his efforts? Where are the models of excellence for this man? In the mass, he tends to lose such self-confidence as he ever had, for life in such a society of masses both implants and implements insecurity and impotence.

The political structure of a democratic state assumes the public, and in its rhetoric asserts that this public is the very seat of sovereignty. But given all those forces that have centralized and enlarged and made less political and more administrative the American political life; given all the metropolitan segregation that is no community; given the transformation of the old middle class into something which

perhaps should not even be called middle class; and given all the mass communications that do not truly communicate—what is happening is the decline of a set of publics that is sovereign, except in the most formal and in the most rhetorical sense. And moreover the remnants of such publics as remain in the interstices of the mass society are now being frightened out of existence. They lose their strength; they lose their will for rationality, and for rationally considered decision and action. They are alone and they are afraid.

IV

If even half of what I have said is true, you may well ask: what is the task of the liberal college for adults? Insofar as it is—in ideal at least—truly liberal, the first answer is: *to keep us from being overwhelmed*. Its first and continuing task is to help produce the disciplined and informed *mind* that cannot be overwhelmed. Its first and continuing task is to help develop the bold and sensible individual who cannot be overwhelmed by the burdens of modern life. The aim is nothing more and can be nothing less. And in this, the aim of the liberal school for adults is no different from that of any liberal education; but there are other answers, more specific answers.

The school for adults, after all, does start from a different juncture in the biography of the person and accordingly must deal with a different set of expectations. Knowledge and intellectual practice must be made directly relevant to the human need of the troubled person of the twentieth century, and to the social practices of the citizen. For he must see the roots of his own biases and frustrations if he is to think clearly about himself, or about anything else. And he must see the frustration of idea, of intellect, by the present organization of society, if he is to meet the tasks now confronting the intelligent citizen.

Given our interest in liberal, that is to say in liberating, education, there are two things that the college for adults can do and ought to do: (1) What the college ought to do for the individual is to turn personal troubles and concerns into social issues and rationally open problems. The aim of

the college, for the individual student, is to eliminate the need in his life for the college; the task is to help him to become a self-educating man. For only that will set him free. (2) What the evening college ought to do for the community is to fight all those forces which are destroying genuine publics and creating an urban mass; or stated positively: to help build and to strengthen the self-cultivating liberal public. For only that will set them free.

These two concerns, if we take them seriously, come together in the three areas which are the focal concerns of the Center for the Study of Liberal Education for Adults: I. the content and methods of teaching; II. the development of leadership; and III. the coordination of the school with other organizations, which I shall discuss in terms of the political relevance of the college for adults.¹²

V

The college of the metropolitan area is usually concerned with the training of skills that are of more or less direct use in the vocational life. This is an important task to perform, but I shall not discuss it here, for (1) it is a matter that hinges in great part for each school upon the local labor market and upon the vocational interests of students; moreover (2) job advancement is not the same as self-development although the two are systematically confused.¹³

Very broadly speaking the function of education as it was first set up in this country was political: to make citizens more knowledgeable and better thinkers. In time, the function of education shifted from the political to the economic; to train people for better paying jobs. This was especially so with reference to the high school movement, which met the demands of the business economy for white-collar skills, at public expense. So far as the political task is concerned, in many schools, that has been reduced to the firm inculcation of nationalist loyalties and the trivialization of life known as "life-adjustment."

¹² Brochure, from the Center, undated.

¹³ Cf. C. Wright Mills, "Work Milieu and Social Structure," *Proceedings*, 1954, of Mental Health Society of Northern California.

A "liberal education, especially for adults, cannot be merely vocational,"¹⁴ but among "skills," some are more, and some are less, relevant to the liberal arts aim. I do not believe that skills and values can so easily be separated as in our search for the supposed neutrality of skills we sometimes assume. And especially not when we speak seriously of liberal education. Of course, there is a scale, with skills at one end and values at the other, but it is the middle range of this scale, which I would call *sensibilities*, that should interest us most.

To train someone to operate a lathe or to read and write is pretty much an education of skill; to evoke from someone an understanding of what they really want out of their life or to debate with them stoic, Christian and humanist ways of living, is pretty much a clear-cut education of values. But to assist in the birth among a group of people of those cultural and social and political and technical sensibilities which would make them genuine members of a genuinely liberal public—this is at once a training in skills and an education of values.

Alongside skill and value we ought to put sensibility, which includes them both and more besides: it includes a sort of therapy in the ancient sense of clarifying one's knowledge of one's self, it includes the imparting of all those skills of controversy with oneself which we call thinking, and with others which we call debate.

We must begin with what concerns the student most deeply. We must proceed in such a way and with such materials as to enable him to gain increasingly rational insight into these concerns. We must try to end with a man or a woman who can and will by themselves continue what we have begun: the end product of the liberal education, as

¹⁴ I agree with A. E. Bestor, who writes that "if the schools are doing their job, we should expect educators to point to the significant and indisputable achievement in raising the intellectual level of the nation—measured perhaps by larger per capita circulation of books and serious magazines, by definitely improved taste in movies and radio programs, by higher standards of political debate, by increased respect for freedom of speech and of thought, by marked decline in such evidences of mental retardation as the incessant reading of comic books by adults." *Educational Wastelands* (Univ. of Ill., 1953), p. 7.

I have said, is simply the self-cultivating man and woman.

Not the epistemology of, but the therapy resulting from, the Socratic maxim is perfectly sound, and especially so for the liberal education in the adult school. There should be much small group discussion, and at least some of the skills of the group therapist ought to be part of the equipment of the teacher.¹⁵

Whether he knows it or not, the man in the mass is gripped by personal troubles, and he is not able to turn them into social issues, or to see their relevance for his community nor his community's relevance for them.

The knowledgeable man in the genuine public is able to do just that; he understands that what he thinks and feels to be personal troubles are very often not only that but problems shared by others and indeed not subject to solution by any one individual but only by modifications of the structure of the groups in which he lives and sometimes the structure of the entire society.

Men in masses have troubles although they are not always aware of their true meaning and source. Men in publics confront issues, and they are aware of their terms. It is the task of the liberal institution, as of the liberally educated man, continually to translate troubles into issues and issues into the terms of their human meaning for the individual.

In the absence of deep and wide political debate that is really open and free within the framework of a metropolitan community, the adult school could and should become a hospitable framework for just such debate. Only if such procedures are built into the college for adults will that college be liberal, that is liberating, and at the same time real; encouraging people to get in touch with the realities of themselves and of their world.

VI

The network of informal communication in the primary public may select and refract, it may debunk or it may

¹⁵ I do not believe in discussion for its own sake, or for its therapeutic effect alone, at least not in school. If people have not yet earned the intellectual right to an opinion they ought in a school to be made to shut up long enough to start earning the right.

sanction what is said in the formal media, or by the authorities. Everyone who talks with others is part of this network, and the ideal public is composed of people who are opinion peers in a community of such publics. But there are gradations of social and intellectual skills: it is reasonable to suppose that certain types of people may be more important than others in channeling the flow of talk and in mediating the impact of the formal media, the authoritarian assertion, the demagogic shout. Some people will be more readily and more frequently articulate. Some will carry greater weight than others. I will not call these "opinion leaders" for that term has been used in a quite different sense than I intend here.¹⁶ I shall call them simply informal leaders. They are the people who are willing to stand up and be counted, and who, while standing up, can say something that is listened to.

The existence of these informal leaders is one major reason why opinion is not subject to the overweening dominance of the structure of power and its mass media. For they rally those who by their informal discussions manufacture opinion. They are the radiant points, the foci of the primary public. This primary public is at times a resistor of media and of their pressure upon the individual. If there is any socially organized intelligence that is free to answer back, and to give support to those who might answer back, it must somehow be this primary public. Now insofar as such circles exist, the effective strength of any formal medium lies in its acceptance by these informal circles and their unofficial leaders. And the same is true of liberal education.

The job of the college for adults, I should think, would be to try to get into touch with such informal leaders. For it is around them that real publics could develop. If they could be encouraged to look upon the adult college as a place in which to experience an expansion of their own social skills and public sensibilities they would, I am sure, become prime referral agencies; they could become your liaison with the various publics of your community. With them and through them you could strengthen and help

¹⁶ Paul Lazarsfeld, *et al.*, *The People's Choice*.

animate such publics, and then you could set free in many of its members the process of self-education.

To bring such people out, to help develop them into a community, you must surround your students with models of straightforward conduct, clarified character, and open reasonableness, for I believe it is in the hope of seeing such models that many serious people go to lectures rather than more conveniently reading books. If there are not such men and women on your faculties, you will not attract those who are potential rallying points for the genuine liberal public. In the end, all talk of liberal education, of personnel and curriculum and programming and the rest of it, is nonsense if you do not have such men and women on your faculties. For in the end, liberal education is the result of the liberating and self-sustaining touch of such people.

And their existence in a community as a creative minority is, in the end, the only force that might prevail against the ascendancy of the mass society, and all the men and apparatus that make for it. For in the end, it is around them and through them that liberated and liberating publics come to articulate form and democratic action.

VII

I have not yet discussed the relation of the school with other organizations in the metropolitan community, the third point of importance to the Center. It is a complicated issue that I cannot adequately cover in the time available. Let me say only that I doubt that education, for adults or for adolescents, is the strategic factor in the building of a democratic polity. I think it is in the picture and must be, but given its present personnel and administration, and its generally powerless position among other politically relevant organizations, it cannot and will not get the job done. Only if it were to become the framework within which more general movements that were under way—movements with more direct political relevance—were going on, only then would it have the chance to take the place in American political life that it ought to. Only then could it in fact do fully what I have suggested it ought

nevertheless to try now to do. For men and women cannot develop and use their highest potentiality in and through educational institutions: they can do that only within and through all of their institutions. And educational work cannot be the sole preparation for such a humane and political life; it can only be part of it, helping it, to be sure, once it is part of the general movement of American civilization.

In the meantime, in the absence of such movements, we cannot dodge the fact that to the extent that the adult college is effective, it is going to be political; its students are going to try to influence decisions of power.

If there were parties or movements that were related to ideas and within which ideas of social life were truly debated and connected with real personal troubles; and if these movements had a chance to win or to influence power—then there might be less public need of colleges for adults. Or if they did exist, it would be within these movements.

But in the absence of such moving publics, these schools ought to become the framework within which such publics exist, at least in their inchoate beginnings, and by which their discussions are fed and sustained. But to do so, they are going to have to get into trouble. For publics that really want to know the realities of their community and nation and world are, by that determining fact, politically radical. Politics as we know it today often rests upon myths and lies and crackpot notions; and many policies, debated and undebated, assume inadequate and misleading definitions of reality. When such myth and hokum prevail, those who are out to find the truth are bound to be upsetting. This is the role of mind, of intellect, of reason, of ideas: to define reality adequately and in a publicly relevant way. The role of education, especially of education for adults, is to build and sustain publics that will "go for," and develop, and live with, and act upon, adequate definitions of reality.

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