

## SECOND WILLIAM E. DRAKE LECTURE

### OUR HISTORICAL DUTY

James E. McClellan, Jr.  
Corpus Christi State University

Today's lecture continues work begun in 1976 directly after the publication of my very analytical Philosophy of Education. This final period of my academic life is lived in expiation of manifold sins committed earlier, in particular, the twin sins of having abandoned the cause of Progressive education when (perhaps) it could have been saved, and of having done so merely to enjoy practicing skills of linguistic analysis acquired in various departments of philosophy. Today's remarks are meager compensation for what could and should have been said and done earlier and better. Please take them in this spirit--confessions of a lost soul who, in his twilight hours, returns to the faith he was trained in and fled from in youth.

My redemption hinges on whether certain skills and understandings gained in the practice of philosophical analysis can be mustered and organized toward the revival of Progressive education. Practicing a virtue taught by pragmatists and logical positivists alike, let us begin our discussion with an operational definition. An educational program is to be rated Progressive in proportion to its satisfaction of three criteria: (i) it is directed toward the fullest self-development of each young person entrusted to its care, (ii) it is fully social--i.e., organized into activities that require and teach skills of cooperative effort and democratic decision-making, (iii) it is permeated throughout with the faith and practice of scientific inquiry. The case to be laid before you is simply stated: our historical duty is to reawaken commitment to Progressive education in those entrusted to our teaching and to initiate a political movement which can bring Progressive education alive in this country.

Whose duty? Yours, if you participate in the training of teachers, particularly if you teach somewhere in foundations of education, more particularly still if you teach or are trained in philosophy of education. Yours, if you find the following argument persuasive. Yours especially if you can better make the case persuasive to others.

An example. I once visited a school where youngsters actually extracted molten iron from ore using technology dating to the earliest local users of the metal. (It was on a collective farm outside of Kiev in 1959; I cannot find or recall the name of the village, perhaps it was "Chernobyl.") Pictures in the hallways, some dating back many years, showed successive cohorts of students struggling to translate archaeological evidence into a working furnace. We were there in the summer so did not see it actually done, but one could look on the equipment and visualize youngsters growing in wisdom and strength through their cooperative effort to make the iron melt. One immediately recognizes in that activity itself an especially appropriate medium for satisfying (i)-(iii) above. To the extent that that kind of activity is properly integrated into the whole, to that extent is an educational program Progressive. Our duty, to repeat, is to make that kind of education central in school programs.

Well, you may say, (i)-(iii) are lovely rhetoric, and Progressive activities might be quite nice in their own way, but schools have more important priorities to consider at the moment. From a social point of view, schools must prepare a work force, both P-MC (Professional-Managerial Class) and proletariat, capable of producing goods and services of a quality and price which will maintain American competitiveness on the world market and thus the American standard of living at home; from an individual point of view, schooling must give every child maximum opportunity to escape the increasingly dreadful lot of the proletariat in this country, specifically by enhancing equality of access to the college credentials required for membership in the P-MC. Let me add that I regard those demands as inescapable; if we cannot satisfy them, other forms of socialization will replace schools as we have known them for the last 150 years. But let us say for the moment that you accept our minimal definition of "Progressive," and that you would even prefer that schools should be directed toward Progressive goals instead of toward national or individual competitiveness. (Even if your instincts do not run this way, please bear with us for a moment; the case goes deeper than emotional attachment.) Still, you claim, the fact that we share a preference gives me no right to tell you what your duty is. You go further, offer the following argument against any claim on historical duty.

Ought implies can. Without effective capacity to perform an act, an agent cannot have a duty to do it. One can extol the virtues of Progressivism in one's foundations classes, but the evidence tells us that such inapplicable "theory" is regarded with distaste by students and has no effect on classroom practice. To "re-awaken commitment" to Progressivism requires a massive political movement capable of decisive influence on local, State and Federal educational agencies, on producers of school materials, curriculum policy boards, "philanthropic" foundations, etc. But no politician and no party is going to take on that monumental task, for [skipping some steps] the people are not ready for it. And what would it take to bring the American electorate to a

level of political sophistication such that an effective political party ✓ could organize popular support for Progressivism? Nothing less than thorough, systematic education according to Progressive principles. Thus, before we can have Progressive schools we have to have a generation educated in Progressive schools. The present generation, God knows! is not so educated, nor, given this Catch-22, will any subsequent generation be. So we cannot have a duty to do what cannot be done. We might as well talk, you say, of instituting a return to the ancien regime; the time has passed when the banners of Progressivism might float triumphantly over our schools.

And perhaps you are right. But let us never forget our debt to John Dewey, Jack Childs, Bruce Raup, George Counts, Kenneth Benne, George Axtelle, Louise Antz, Ted Brameld, Bunnie Smith, Bill Stanley, Hank Hullfish, Foster McMurray, Bill Drake, . . . and all of those many others only slightly my elders who labored so mightily, struggled among themselves so strongly yet unitedly, both as proponent and critic of Progressivism, to bring and keep that cause alive in American schools . . . only to see it frozen out of American life altogether in the Cold War. Can we build an argument so powerful that it will compel allegiance to Progressivism and establish guidelines for a strategy that might enable us to escape the dead-end of political impotence? If we can, our duty but remains to be done.

Perhaps the most immediately applicable lesson to be learned from last generation's overthrow of logical positivism and recent explosive advances in philosophy of science is this: Allah is One, but truth is internal to theory. Even before we settle on theory, we must first articulate our most fundamental commitments. The argument that follows depends on your acknowledging loyalty to educational principles antedating those we call "Progressives." Henceforth, "we" refers to those whose ultimate professional commitments, as above, are to science, democracy, and the perfection of human being. Here these expressions are not to be taken as mere slogans, a trio some might prefer to "competitiveness." These words are appealed to here as signifying historically significant principles having intellectual authority at the very center of our professional being, individually and collectively. If this trinity is not included in your deepest professional commitments, you are not included in the "we"'s that follow.

We try to practice those commitments as virtues, so to speak, as we practice our professions: thinking through our decisions with strict regard to the canons of scientific rationality; taking collective action according to the letter and spirit of democratic procedure; treating each other, and the generations of human beings that follow this one, as fellow participants in the great drama and joy of human being, each of us entitled, as declares our Declaration of Independence, to pursue happiness--i.e., to strive to fulfill in some coherent balance the unique package of potentialities which we draw, one by one, from the genetic pool and cultural formation our ancestors have bequeathed us. The final purpose of education is to give each young person an ✓

introduction to our cultural heritage which will best serve that individual in her or his quest for self-perfection.

But how does one move from such an abstract statement of professional commitment to a strategy of political action? If we wish to think scientifically about our own problem of advancing the principles to which we claim commitment, we have to look to philosophy of science to clarify that most general term. We might long for the good old days when Cohen & Nagel's Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method expressed a view of science intelligible both to the pre-service teacher and to the scientist on the frontier research. That, as we all know, is no longer true. There are now innumerable and contradictory interpretations of the term under the heading "philosophy of science." But when we apply the most rudimentary tests of scientific adequacy to our thinking about our political problem, we encounter a truth that came before and will remain after the current maelstrom in philosophy: in any historical epoch, an explanation of something is called "scientific" only if it is cast in terms of a theory which is ontologically and epistemologically consistent with the physics and mathematics of that time.

So, we must seek a theoretical understanding of our own political situation which is Q-consistent, that is to say, consistent with the physics and mathematics of our times, an account capable of inclusion in "our theory of the world," as Professor Quine so boldly proclaimed that intricately woven, constantly changing "web of belief" which is one essential component in our definition of science. (The other essential component of "science" is a vast social system charged with the twin duties of improving OTOTW and applying it to human affairs. When we say "science says X," we have both components in mind.) On that view, an understanding of our Catch-22 (and of the world historical stage on which our drama is played out) is a proper candidate for the title "scientific" and acquires the right to have its truth claims considered only if that understanding is cast in a Q-consistent theory.

Now comes the crucial step in the argument. A properly qualified and quantified Marxism is a Q-consistent theory of history. No other such is visible on the cultural scene today. Thus the logic of commitment follows the practical syllogism: if we want to understand our own lives, especially our "normal" professional lives, in a scientifically responsible way, then we must come to see our whole system of education as interconnected with a class struggle of immense proportions and complexity now breaking to the surface all over the world. From an understanding of that struggle arises both our duty to make schools centers of Progressive education and our most basic principles of strategy to accomplish that task.

Just a word on Marxism, "properly qualified and quantified." "Marxism" is here defined as the branch of natural science which treats of social production among the animal species known as Homo sapiens, especially in the historical epochs of our existence on this planet. Those critiques of Marxism, e.g., by Popper and Berlin, which attack the excessive scope

and untestability of certain of its early formulations are, on this view, well taken. Here is no supreme science forcing all others into line. There is no "logic of dialectics" different from deductive, inductive (probability theory), and practical logic. Class relations generated in social production permeate every aspect of social life; none, neither love nor logic, can be understood in a scientifically responsible way without being seen in relation to the system of class relations sustained in social production. Marxism is "properly qualified" when the truth of the sentence just above is carefully distinguished from the claim that the "economic base determines the superstructure," as the impact of a cue determines the motion of a billiard ball. Thus the "reductionism" of "vulgar Marxism" is not at issue here.

"Properly quantified Marxism" means that objective relation to the means of social production defines social classes, and that social classes, so defined, are the ontological center of historical explanation. Changes, however profound, in language & literature, manners & morals, or science & technology become historically significant only as they cause or consolidate changes in social relations of production. "Revolution" becomes a technical term for a change in social production which eliminates an entire class relation from history. There have been two such revolutions in the history of this country. The first, consolidated in practice before our war of national liberation ("the American Revolution"), became basic law when registered in Article I, Sec. 9 of the Constitution. In prohibiting "patents of nobility," that Section forever drove from these shores the class of feudal aristocracy and its attendant class of bound peasants. The second, bought by the blood of black and white alike in our Civil War, was duly registered in the 13th Amendment to that same document which eliminates the class relation of slave and slaveholder. Both revolutions were Progressive on the criteria advanced here.

Now comes another shocker. From a Marxist perspective, we American teachers today stand to the entire world system of social production as vanguard of the working class. We draw goods and services from the pool of social production on the basis of work we do, not property we own. That makes us members of the working class. But we occupy positions in the system of social production reserved (by law or custom) to holders of a baccalaureate or higher academic degree, thus members of the P-MC. ("Intelligentsia" in the USSR.) Our academic societies tie us to the international community of science worldwide; we are also the largest element in organized labor in the country, tied by common interests, though not (thanks to capitalist legislation) tied organizationally, to the world trade union movement. We stand just at the point that proletariat and P-MC both meet and separate. American teachers thus occupy the trenches in the international class struggle; only if we teachers of educational foundations properly prepare them will they have an intellectually responsible understanding of the war they are fighting.

To put it more sharply, our class duty is to bring it about that Progressive values, historically the educator's professional values, become recognized throughout the P-MC as our international class values, that they go on to become the dominant social values of the planet as a whole in the next phase of history. In order for that to happen, if the Marxist analysis is carried through, we must have a third American revolution, one which removes the class relation between worker-operator and owner of productive forces, or, as stated elsewhere, one which seizes the means of production and smashes the capitalist state. Those of us who follow the argument to that point and there, fully apprehending what the choice entails, decide that we so prefer Progressivism to competitiveness that we are willing to accept the disarrangement entailed by even the most orderly social transformation of that magnitude, thereupon accept the political duty to try to bring on then bring off that third American Revolution.

Thus stands our class position, which we share with the vast majority of the American people. But our historical duty derives from our distinct professional role. It is up to us to see to it that the American people achieve the level of political education that will enable them to make an informed choice on our basic economic system and the educational priorities that go with different alternatives. In the meantime, let us acknowledge the correctness of "competitiveness" as an educational goal which must be given attention in schools today. Only when we get serious about training a work force in habits of cooperative intelligence will our efforts produce more profits for employers; but such an electorate might also effect a revolution . . . if they decide they want revolution.

If we do our work correctly, then, without the bloodshed and turmoil that characterized our first two revolutions, a socialist amendment to our Constitution could forbid private ownership of the means of production, perhaps in a clause resembling the experimental 18th, which forbade (until duly repealed) the sale and transportation of alcohol. Or it could be considered and rejected by a politically sophisticated American public who decide that they prefer, all things considered, to leave the means of production in the hands of a capitalist class. However we might feel about it as individuals, as a profession we educators can have no duty to bring revolution on or off. But it is our duty, at this critical point in our history as a democratic society, to bring the American electorate to the point of informed choice on who shall own our productive facilities and for whose purposes they are to be run.

Ugh-oh. Another crucial premise enters the argument: "Critical point in history." And time for but one comment. Given a class-struggle perspective, our class role in history as P-MC is to organize with the rest of the working class to bring human assault on Mother Earth under control, to eliminate the waste of war, to direct research toward establishing (even if, in the words of Chairman Mao, it takes a thousand years) ecological equilibrium between the human species and the rest of

nature. Every day's delay shortens the time separating us from too late. That sense of "critical."

So what are we to do? This discussion is one answer. Let us exercise our imagination in concert, try to think together how it could be and how it could be done. Please think about two points in particular. How can we isolate and eliminate (first from our own hearts, of course) the overt and covert anti-Sovietism, anti-Communism so firmly established as a basic premise in American political debate? In furtherance of that and other Progressive goals, it is not time to ask the leadership of our national academic societies in education to explore the idea of calling for an international teachers conference on education for peace? Can we now imagine asking our Soviet counterpart societies to join us as co-sponsors? Can we look toward creating a common course of study on the history of 20th century and planning for the 21st, we telling our story the way we would like the next generation of Soviet and other nations' youth to understand it, they telling us their story in the same spirit, together looking toward the next phase of a united human history? Aye, such thoughts do stir the imagination. And from imagination, who knows what may come?

#### NOTES

1. James E. McClellan, Jr., Philosophy of Education (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976)

2. "The great danger which American culture faces today . . . is that in searching for economic and personal security we will lose that heritage of freedom which is a marked characteristic of classical liberalism. The fact that the American people are generally lacking in a sense of history; that they are now absorbed with a psychotic fear of communism; that they are given to verbal sentimentality about the essence of a free society, provides good seed bed for the growth of a glorified form of Hegelian nationalism [Fascism]." William Earle Drake, Intellectual Foundations of Modern Education (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc., 1967) 234-35.