

Conformity and Anti-Intellectualism

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In recent years American educators have again taken stock, and their inventories have proved to be frighteningly low. The educational revolution accomplished in the wake of Dewey's progressivism and in the image of Columbia Teachers College destroyed much of value and added little which was positive. It is now only an academic point whether Dewey would have agreed with what was done in his name, for the results are too much with us. It is a matter of record that American students are ill prepared academically and that in the name of "educating the whole child" we have debased our intellectual coinage. Recent Soviet scientific advances have focussed public attention on these continuing conditions, and now that Sputnik's first shock is past, we are aware of the educational shoddy which has passed for quality goods.

Professional educators must bear the greatest responsibility for the direction our schools have taken. Well organized pressure groups in state legislatures have dictated the curricula and training programs for primary and secondary schools, while the colleges of education have deeply influenced the patterns and attitudes which modern American schools reflect. As a group possessing power and influence, the educators must also accept the responsibility which goes with power. But there is another point to be considered, and as an historian, I find it rather striking. Our educational system is not something which developed apart from society, but on the contrary it reflects tendencies which are fundamental to our social life. Put in these terms, education's present problems only open a larger issue and a more serious one which rests at the roots of our society. That problem appears in the current revulsion against intellectual values and the spirit of conformity which produced it.

Intellectuals are very self-conscious these days, and indeed the intellectual is self-conscious by definition. For this reason I want to make it clear that anti-intellectualism does not mean just society's reaction to the intellectual. Rather it means a cast of mind, or mode of thought, which rejects intellectual values, and is,

therefore, more significant than any attack on any particular individual. The attacks come as the outward manifestation of a non-intellectual state of mind or as the result of activating its peculiar values. Furthermore I want to avoid giving any sociological or professional significance to "anti-intellectualism." People who hold an anti-intellectual approach populate our university faculties as well as the great market place. In this sense the cultural stream is polluted at its very source. Universities themselves must struggle to maintain intellectual values, and not the least of their problems are the faculty members who have abdicated their cultural obligations. Students can scarcely be expected to respond to teachers who have sold their birthright. Certainly the University of Missouri faces these problems. Missouri students differ little from students across the country, and the Missouri faculty, like faculties everywhere else, has been recruited from the four corners of the nation and from abroad. Students have raised the problem of anti-intellectualism here, and there seems to be some sentiment that Missouri is peculiar in the spiritual apathy and cultural slackness which appear. This is not necessarily true. Rather than being a special case, the University of Missouri presents in microcosm tendencies which are all too obvious in our national life, and the explanation for local conditions lies in the broader national picture.

Anti-intellectualism has a long tradition which reaches deep into the past and extends far beyond our boundaries. But anti-intellectualism as we know it is specifically the product of our immediate past and reflects a value system which is peculiarly our own. Intellectualism finds its essence in the individual who seeks his own truth, who defines his own taste, and who develops his own values. Ready-made truths are no more palatable to him than packaged dinners, and he much prefers his own decisions, whether ideological or gustatory. At best our society calls such a man a dreamer—"egghead" is the most recent affectation—, and at worst slanders him as a

subversive. Society has always demanded conformity, but our society demands enthusiastic conformity.

There are several reasons for this peculiar emphasis, and they are bred into the very bones of our social organism. Industrial development since the Civil War has been prodigious, and ours has become pre-eminently an industrial society. Mass production has provided all manner of material conveniences which are available to most of the people and which have produced a continuing rise in our material standard of living. But we have paid a heavy price. Individual taste has had to compromise with production costs, and more and more the items which we buy are differentiated only by price and label. The highways are crowded with an unvarying stream of sameness, and our cities are ringed about with unrelieved structural boredom. The \$50,000 split level in its landscaped setting is the same from coast to coast and border to border, while the humble \$15,000 "ranch house" proliferates row upon row, city after city, with nothing to distinguish it but pathetically drastic adventures in pastel coloration. We have become the victims of our own technology, and the mass patterns which mass production forces upon us blunt our sensibilities.

This necessary loss of choice would in itself be bad enough, but in recent years we have convinced ourselves that it is both necessary and good. Expansion in material opportunity and constriction in choice have been paralleled by positive emphasis on the desirability of conformity and security. Nowhere is this more striking than among college students who see their education in terms of the degree and who weigh job opportunities on the scales of security. To stand against the group in job choice, dress, mode of living or taste creates furious tensions and invites social reprisals. Recent studies have shown conclusively that sameness, conformity, acceptance, have become positive social virtues, and that it is the group, however it may be motivated, which establishes standards. Religious life has shown this drastically, and in many suburban communities sectarianism has been overcome at the cost of making the church only a community center.

These developing economic, social and aesthetic patterns have been reinforced in our schools, colleges and universities. In education, equality of opportunity has come to mean equality in achievement, and the right to go to school has become the right to graduate. More than this, the very curricula have been subjected to the equalitarian test: courses slanted to the majority, standards debased, and the ideal of education for all become the reality of education for none. The students sauntering through their education glance contemptuously at books and mentors, and well they may, for mediocrity has become the accepted achievement norm, and educators are almost indecently happy when that line is occasionally passed. Science, mathematics and foreign language have been shamefully neglected and the number of college students who lack even the rudiments of English grammar, spelling and composition is shocking. And the after-effects of this

pedagogical shabbiness are equally striking. The percentage of Americans who read books after leaving college is abysmally low, and the general cultural level of the nation is depressed all out of proportion to the literacy ratios. The mass media—radio, television, newspapers—play to this depressed level, and by doing so, perpetuate it.

The "crisis in education," as the Sunday supplements call it, is both a cause and an effect. In the sense that education has failed and is failing to provide the necessary intellectual challenge, stimulus or even tools, it sends out products who are capable only of acceptance and who are not able to conquer the fear of the unknown. Furthermore, by emphasizing the norm, education strengthens the sense of necessary conformity and positively advances mass cultural patterns. The seriousness of this problem is underscored by conformity's penetration into the very nerve centers of our society. Major scientific research organizations insist on "teamplay" and avoid the erratic genius like the plague. Businesses look for the man who will "fit in" and place conformity rather than capacity at the top of their rating scales, and even universities have shown a marked tendency to value comfortable competence above unpredictable creativity. Educa-

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tion itself shows this tendency, and to that extent, may be regarded as another evidence of the prevailing mode.

These attitudes have developed over a number of years, and they are developing still. These are the attitudes which produce that intellectual apathy and unconcern which in turn fertilize anti-intellectualism. The student body and faculty at Missouri reflect these tendencies, and to that extent participate in the cultural barbarism which is becoming a part of our heritage. It is significant that the two great powers in the modern age, the United States and the Soviet Union, while dissimilar in so many respects, show a consistent similarity in their fear of the unusual, the non-conformist, the intellectual. We have a proud tradition of freedom, but we are in real danger of freedom's becoming only a tradition. The rising conformist tide lacks drama, but its dangers are even more immediate than those embodied in the Commissars confronting us.

Dr. McGrew's article stems from his informal remarks as a panel member during a campus discussion program.

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conferred on a non-Britain. In 1935 he served as president of the American Association of Schools and Departments of Journalism.

His own son was to serve in Africa as an AP war correspondent. Frank L. Martin, Jr. is now publisher of the West Plains (Mo.) Daily Quill and a member of the executive committee of the Fiftieth Anniversary observance of the School of Journalism.

The Martins' daughter, Martha Ann, is the wife of Maj. Gen. Ralph P. Swofford, Jr., stationed at Bolling Air Force base in Washington.

The Swoffords have four children, Frank, Ralph III, Anne and Susan.

Frank L. Martin, Jr., has one son, Frank Lee Martin III.

Today, the Frank L. Martin Memorial Library stands as a tribute to the man who came for a year and stayed for a lifetime.

Harry E. Taylor, B.J. '15, editor and publisher of the Traer (Ia.) Star-Clipper, wrote:

"I have always marveled at Dean Martin, who for many years had the task of training a fresh crop of cub reporters every semester. In the later years the enrollment in his reporting classes was usually 100 or more.

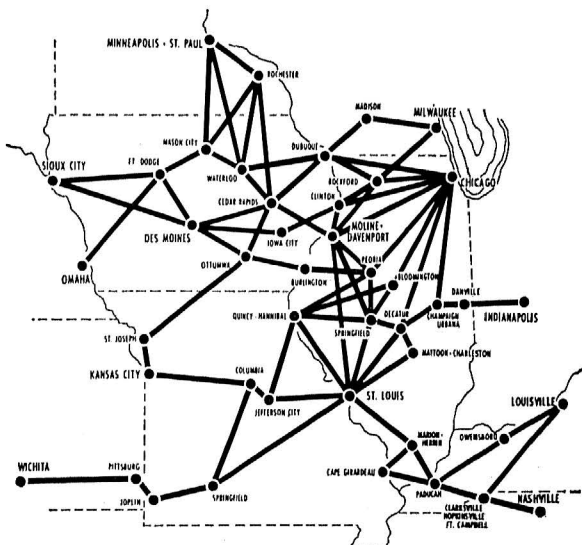
"Each and every one of us who had any talent for newspaper work, or showed any willingness to learn, was given the solid foundation here for a successful start in journalism by Dean Martin.

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