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Some Thoughts On "Permanent Education"

By Robert McClintock

How Europeans Are Trying To Make Education A Continuous Process And What American Educators Can Learn from Their Example

When a French cinema advertises ***une séance permanente,*** it offers a continuous showing. So too, when European educators suggest that the state should provide its citizens with ***une éducation permanente,*** they mean a system in which each person has continuous educational opportunities.

Unfortunately, the literalists have established their translation, "permanent education," promising fixity thereby, and in these changing times, no less. The phrase, permanent education, conflicts with the very situation from which it arises: increasingly, one's education must be continuous precisely because one's childhood education is proving to be a most impermanent acquisition. As the pace of history quickens, as cycles of innovation and obsolescence shorten, the child can no longer be the father of the man. Too frequently, the opinions, facts, and skills the youth proudly acquires, fitting himself for life, become a burden of prejudice, misinformation, and trained incapacity that the adult must desperately shirk as circumstances wheel him from one unexpected emergency to the next.

Many influential Europeans find the solution to this problem in permanent education, the goal of which will be to enhance each person's adaptability in an ever changing environment. The Council for Cultural Co-operation, a branch of the Council of Europe, has been most active in sponsoring studies of how the European governments can provide their citizens with more continuous educational opportunities.

Many of these studies are collected in a stout volume on ***Permanent Education*** published in 1970 by the Council of Europe. Alas, the writers have a penchant for technocratic cant, but even so, the points they are making should be of great importance to American discussions of educational policy.

Permanent education has in it an aspect akin to the American movement to de-school society. In the 1960's French educational critics, perplexed by the failing authority of the formal school system, postulated the concept of ***l'éducation parallel,*** the idea that for the student there was, parallel to the formal educational institutions, a great growth in the informal sources of information. The young student would often perceive the parallel sources of information to be considerably more interesting and authoritative: hence, he learned to scorn the schools and to dig the media. Theorists of ***l'éducation permanente*** accept this diminished authority of the school as a fact of contemporary life and seek in recompense to make constructive use of ***l'éducation parallel,*** coordinating formal and informal educational

opportunities so that they will combine into a continuous agency for self-development throughout each person's life. Thus, like those bent on de-schooling society, they envisage that in a system of permanent education the school will play a much less dominant part than it does today.

Qualifying this similarity, however, is an important difference. Unlike American exponents of alternatives to the school, who generally raise anti-establishmentarian colors, the European proponents of permanent education work from within the net, sponsored by the national ministries of education and the fast-growing supranational bureaucracies. They are structural-functionalists; they are anxious to ensure the survival of Western European societies by increasing each European's capacity to adapt effectively to the rapid economic, political, and social changes that all are experiencing. They expect change, profound change, but as men charged with the task of modulating, directing that change, they display no taint of the apocalyptic sensibility.

Although ideas of permanent education have been advanced with considerable official sponsorship, they are, for that, no less radical, at least in the sense of going to the root. In actuality, these radical changes call for complicated and detailed policies, the working out of which requires time and care. Permanent education is no quick solution. And it is not clear yet whether the Europeans will actually bring it into being. But the impetus toward it is strong, and if the European movement is not unhinged by some unforeseen disaster, some approximation of permanent education will in all likelihood be developed in coming decades. And if one will hold in abeyance the details, the basic features of this new system are well worked out and can be here set forth.

Accordingly, let us first spell out the claim to a radical reform: in implementing permanent education, European ministries would be working toward a fundamental reorganization on a scale similar to that which took place in the 19th century with the spread of universal, compulsory schooling. This reorganization would be based on the recognition that education can no longer be concentrated in a person's youth. It must instead be spread throughout each person's life, and to do so properly, one should do more than add a variety of adult educational opportunities to the current educational system. Rather, the whole system should be reshaped with the presumption that education would be continuous, which would entail significant changes in the educational opportunities specifically offered to the young.

An increasing burden of substantive content has settled on elementary and secondary schooling. In industrial democracies, patterns of production are no longer traditional, not even for the rural agriculturalist. Thus all must take part in a fast-moving commercial economy. And with politics everywhere dominated by countervailing interest groups, each must learn to organize in the defense of his interests or else those who are quicker, shrewder, better connected will organize him and his like into the civic fall guy. In such a world, if the child is to be the father of the man, he must be a busy child indeed, learning in addition to the three R's, a complicated trade, political sophistication, the techniques of consumerism, and the rules of the road. Assuming, however, that education is continuous, most of this burden of content can be ignored in the upbringing of the young. That educational monstrosity, the terminal program, would become a relic of the past. Educators would have the task of preparing each for further education.

To so prepare the young, educators should accentuate three matters. First, they should see that basic education is at the heart of the curriculum. The function of elementary and secondary education, both in and out of school, would not be to impart information to the young, but to empower the adult to acquire it — to find, to absorb, to combine, to communicate the particular information he desires with as little outside direction as possible. Second, in keeping with the idea of continuous education, the present separation between the realm of work and that of education should from the beginning be diminished, not primarily so that one leaves school all ready to work, but rather so that one acquires at the start the realization that the basic tools mastered in one's education are in pervasive use in every walk of work. Third, also in keeping with the idea of continuous education, the other great separation between the realm of education and that of leisure should likewise be reduced. With the rise of mass communications, hours devoted to leisure by both young and old have become great sources of information and opinions. But with the separation between study and leisure people are encouraged to accept ideas through the media passively and uncritically by not bringing the intellectual rigor supposedly cultivated through education to bear upon the seemingly separate realm of leisure. Hence one of the tasks for the educators of the young in a system of permanent education will be to empower people to use the media actively and critically as sources of further learning, making these serve their personal purposes, not those of commerce or the state. All these are important matters: if, once the educational opportunities specifically for the young have been transformed so as to be more in the midst of life, people cannot bring learning into a more integral involvement with work and leisure, chances are

slim that the idea of permanent education can be made a reality.

In a system of permanent education, however, the young could eschew much content in their education, formal and informal, and concentrate on mastering the tools of learning, both manual and mental, getting in the habit of applying these actively in work and leisure, because they could later deal with the substantive content, for provisions would be made for all in higher and adult education. Adult life would cease to be a long stretch of work, leavened with annual vacations and, for those who so chose, studious dedication to a hobby, all drawn onward by the pensioned telos of retirement. Instead, the way that work, learning, and leisure could be intermixed during one's lifetime would be extremely varied and the institutional provisions for such combinations would require imaginative and careful planning.

Only a few of the possibilities can be mentioned. On the simplest level the state would produce and broadcast diverse programs for television instruction and culturally meaningful recreation, leaving it up to each person to decide whether or not to make use of these opportunities. Likewise, it could provide community centers of instruction, either leaving attendance up to the citizen's choice, or, much more radically, legislating compulsory attendance to certain courses under certain conditions (as some states presently require that people convicted of certain traffic offenses attend compulsory driver education courses). Finally, and most significantly, with a system of permanent education, there would be a number of ways in which adults would be paid, not only to work, but also to study. Already, in some jobs steps up the salary scale are conditioned on the completion of certain programs of study, and this practice might become more general. Beyond that, the real innovation, the essential feature in compensated study, would be national programs of paid educational leave: as part of the social security system, each person would have the right to take a paid leave from his work for varying periods, averaging say one year in ten, to study fulltime in a program of his choice.

Working out the financial and institutional details of such plans will be a most complicated matter, and if the schemes are poorly conceived or executed, they could create a miasmic pedagogical morass. To succeed, the problem will be in at once imbuing the programs with real substance and standards without making them thereby paternalistic and unpopular. Over the long run, whether the quality of the adult component of permanent education can be upheld, will undoubtedly depend on whether in their early education the young can be equipped with a critical command of the tools of learning. With that accomplished, one could expect that the adult opportunities would indeed give each meaningful access to diverse sources of knowledge and greatly increase his ability to change and adapt his skills and interests throughout his life. On the other hand, should those opportunities follow a mindless basic education, they would simply subject the adult to yet another system of paternal manipulation. Thus permanent education, like all the social innovations of modern history, is by itself no guarantee of goodness: whether it serves to liberate or to manipulate depends on how well it is organized and used.

If it comes into being, permanent education will be a European initiative. Although some of the components that would go into a system of permanent education are highly developed in the United States, the willingness or capacity to coordinate them centrally is seriously underdeveloped. Having failed to create a rational welfare system, we have been unwilling even to attempt to establish a national program of health care. Willing to tax ourselves only for purposes of national defense, chances are slim that we will mobilize the resources with which we could reorganize our system of national education. Yet two facts bear consideration: our present system of education is not working well, for many it seems not to be working in the least, and in matters of social legislation, the Europeans have generally been in our advance. Hence, it is perhaps not impossible that in the not too distant future those who are now willing only to work outside the system and those within it who perceive its glaring imperfections may find themselves rejoining around the idea of permanent education. Doing so, they might then become a pedagogical and political force, renewing our humane and liberal hopes. ■

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The Institute of Philosophy and Politics of Education
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, N.Y. 10027

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