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**DISCIPLINARY PROLIFERATION, GENERAL EDUCATION, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY
CITIZENSHIP IN MODERN AMERICA**

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1940s Americans sought unity. As the country fought in World War II, many called for national cultural, social, and political cohesiveness. Their efforts were instantiated in community organizations, in activities of government agencies, by business and labor organizations, and in the works of policy makers and intellectuals. They studied and sought to improve civilian morale by conducting advertising campaigns to promote national unity and by establishing community-building and discussion groups to further inter-group tolerance across religious, racial, and ethnic lines.¹

American policy makers and social thinkers treated the cultural and intellectual life as primary determinant of national cohesiveness. They worried that the qualities most characteristic of the modern world – including science and technology, expansion of knowledge, rapid change, and an increasing complexity of social and political life – threatened to tear social bonds, dissolve the nation’s coherence as a social and political entity, and fragment individual experience.

According to this view, lack of unity was so dire that it was the cause of the current world war. David Lilienthal, the director of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), starkly conveyed the specific fears provoked by the modernity’s fragmented culture and “underlying philosophy of life.” But when Lilienthal pointed to the dissolution of culture, he meant something particular and more specific than lack of understanding between the Allied and Axis powers.

¹ Benjamin Leontief Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s-1950s, Cultural Studies of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); James H. Capshew, *Psychologists on the March: Science, Practice, and Professional Identity in America, 1929-1969* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chapter 2; Wendy Wall, *Inventing the American Way: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

As Lilienthal saw it, the disunity that threatened the destruction of the world was produced by modernity's "high degree of specialization of function."² As an example of this corrosive specialization, Lilienthal pointed to the proliferation of experts who worked for the TVA – specialists in fields ranging from electrical engineering to soil chemistry and dendrology. According to Lilienthal then it was not Hitler's imperialistic ambitions or quest for domination of Europe that caused the war. Instead it was a central fact of modernity: the inability of people with different disciplinary training to speak meaningfully with one another.

The TVA was a convenient and appropriate indicator of the direction the modern world was taking. Aside from its purpose of bringing modernization and development to the Tennessee Valley, the TVA marked an extension and consolidation of state power. The TVA was one of the signature programs of the New Deal, had been personally planned by Franklin Roosevelt, and was a part of legislation passed during the first 100 days of his administration.

In its initial stages, the TVA focused primarily on improving economic development in the Tennessee Valley, a region that stretched over seven states, with programs for electrification, for canal and dam building, for disease abatement, for improving schooling, and for combating deforestation and soil erosion. Electricity generated by new dams would be used to produce fertilizers to aid in soil regeneration and to provide electricity for the first time to many residents of the region. The TVA also placed an agency of the federal government into competition with private electricity producers.

Under Lilienthal's leadership the TVA expanded its operations from a focus on agriculture to developing the Tennessee Valley through attracting heavy industry, especially those associated with the war. During the war, the TVA supplied electricity for aluminum production as well as for the production of enriched uranium at Oak Ridge for the Manhattan Project.³ As director of the TVA,

² David E. Lilienthal, "The Unification of Specialized Knowledge in Practical Affairs," in *Science, Philosophy, and Religion: Third Symposium* (New York: Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life, Inc., 1943), p. 237-39.

³ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 148; David Eli Lilienthal, *TVA: Democracy on the March* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966); Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 36.

Lilienthal thus occupied a privileged location for observing and commenting on the cutting edge of modernity and modernization.

However remarkable Lilienthal's belief that specialization was the "root cause" of World War II now seems, his sense that disunity of culture led to spiritual degradation and destruction was widely shared. This sentiment was the major refrain of the meeting at which he delivered his address. At this particular event, the annual meeting of Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion (CSPR) as well as others held by the CSPR, over 150 leading academics, social commentators, theologians and politicians came together with the goal of developing an appropriate unified culture for American society.

Like Lilienthal, other CSPR participants saw America as threatened by the lack of unity, whether of an intellectual or spiritual variety. As they viewed it, the largest dangers to national and international unity were the loss of common culture produced by modernization, fragmentation, and the growth of science and technology and intellectual specialization. To the extent that intellectuals were engaged in advancing the boundaries of knowledge, they might not only have represented, but – like the dendrologists who worked for the TVA – have also been a primary cause of the "world crisis."

So significant did questions of intellectual culture seem that conference participants charged one another with responsibility for the rise of fascism or abetting its totalitarianism.⁴ Having identified their own differences as undermining the stability of the world and with participants seeing others within the same conference as the enemies of democracy, finding a resolution would be critical. Should culture be unified by spiritual and religious values, or through a free spirit of inquiry? Which approach was more directly tied to democracy? Was democracy rooted in faith in the dignity of man, a commitment developed through faith in the Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish tradition, or was it more closely attached to freedom of thought, including freedom from religious doctrine?

⁴ E.g., Mortimer J. Adler, "God and the Professors," in *Science, Philosophy, and Religion: A Symposium* (New York: Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion in their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life, Inc., 1941).

If we broaden our view beyond the walls of this annual interdisciplinary conference it becomes clear that these debates over the intellectual and cultural directions of the country were a part of a sustained national discussion on how intellectuals and policy makers could best respond the fragmenting effects of modernity. This discussion occurred in perhaps its strongest form over the issues of educational policy and curriculum design. In this arena, debate would be more protracted and would have longer lasting and broader effects.

To the intellectuals, educators and policy makers who were involved in this particular aspect of the debate over how to make modern America unified, the stakes seemed particularly high. Resolution would determine what students encountered in the classroom, what kinds of people they would become, and the ultimate shape of society. Discussion of education involved not only the shape of an abstract intellectual culture, but also the kinds of right-minded citizens who would populate America. Imbued with a proper sense of culture and the right kind of mind, these individuals would shape American society and its democracy.

This paper examines on the centrality of education for the national culture. It centers on the set of solutions that were characterized either as “liberal education” or as “general education.” These programs sought to unify the nation by unifying the secondary and collegiate curriculum. However, although education itself offered solutions to the problem of national dissolution, proper pedagogy was itself highly contested. Agreeing on curriculum content and methods of teaching was no easy matter. Since education was so closely linked to politics, discussion about pedagogical matters was frequently also about proper citizenship, the definition of the good society, the true meaning of democracy, and how to manage the complexity of the modern world.

Ultimately the differences between pedagogical programs turned on the how they sought to manage the growth of knowledge, expansion of science and technology, and the increase of social complexity that characterized modernity. Would science and technology be central to a unified curriculum or would it be treated as peripheral to the concerns of an educational program defined by the great works of Western literature? I examine the disparate positions educators and policy makers adopted in 1930s and first half of the 1940s as well the synthesis developed in 1943-1945 at Harvard by a committee of professors and 75 outside consultants. Ultimately finding a way to cope

with the proliferation of expertise that so frightened Lilienthal and his peers without rejecting modernity required finding a way to treat America as an interdisciplinary community.

EDUCATING FOR UNITY

The set of concerns that linked a democracy to a unified culture that dominated the CSPR also inspired the educational leaders who populated the Educational Policies Commission (EPC) to take up the task of defining how modernity would be addressed by cultivating right-minded citizens. The EPC was a policy making group appointed by the National Education Association and the American Association of School Administrators. It was populated by such nationally recognized leaders of education as Edmund Day, president of Cornell, and George Zook, president of the American Council on Education. After the war, the EPC membership would also include representatives of the U.S. Office of Education and the Carnegie Fund for the Advancement of Teaching; the president of Columbia University; Dwight Eisenhower; and one of most widely recognized experts on education and its relationship to social policy, Harvard president James Bryant Conant.

The EPC played a large role in the world of education policy not only because of its distinguished membership and its relationships with educational organizations, but also because it was connected with several thousand well-placed consultants in education and media who advised the EPC on its reports and helped advertise and implement the reports once they were completed.⁵ For the leaders of the educational and policy world who populated and advised the EPC, so significant was the lack of social coherence that it, rather than the Axis powers' quest for world domination, could be seen as the cause of World War II. As the EPC put it, the war was not "chiefly caused by the machinations of evil men." Instead it was "largely a result of profound dislocations in the culture and social structure caused by the advances in science and technology."⁶

⁵ On the reach of the EPC see Andrew Hartman, *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 59.

⁶ Educational Policies Commission, *The Education of Free Men in American Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Education policies commission National education association of the United States and the American association of school administrators, 1941), 71.

For the EPC and a much wider group of educators, these problems of cultural fragmentation would be addressed best by curricular innovations that would unify the educational experience of students and provide them a foundation for their future lives as citizens. They hoped that by offering a properly designed educational experience intellectuals could help produce unity in a diverse nation and heal the damage to the national culture that they had had a hand in generating.

If loss of cultural unity was the problem, either “liberal” education or “general” education seemed to be the answer. Movements for liberal and general education had begun as a reaction to the sense that the curriculum was fracturing. As advocates of liberal and general education saw it, several changes in the university that had been accumulating since the late nineteenth century had destroyed curricular unity and undergraduate education.

As they saw it, the introduction of electives had led to a proliferation of courses and a fracturing of the curriculum that had once been defined by the goal of disciplining mental faculties through the study of Greek, Latin, mathematics, and moral philosophy.⁷ Further, with growing emphasis on a research mission in universities, disciplines and departments proliferated as academics pursued increasingly focused and specialized work. Professors eschewed offering broad instruction in their fields for teaching courses that were best suited to their majors or to future graduate students in their own fields. As a consequence, undergraduates would be faced with a collection of disparate, disconnected, narrow courses, each of which was aimed at specialists. Perhaps most critical to the fracturing of the curriculum was the Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890. These acts channeled funds from the sale of federal land to the support of colleges that taught practical studies of agriculture and mechanical arts.⁸ However, despite the significance of these laws in defining American universities after Civil War, advocates of both general and liberal education in the 1930s paid more attention to the elective system than to the Morrill Acts.⁹

⁷ On the connection between the classical curriculum and disciplining mental faculties see Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 36.

⁸ Fredrick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), 117.

⁹ For an instance of the non-emphasis on the Morrill Acts see Robert M. Hutchins, “The Confusion in Higher Education,” *Harpers*, October 1936; Robert M. Hutchins, “What Is a General Education?,” *Harpers*, November 1936. For a contention that the crisis in education began in 1900, with the rise of electives see Mortimer J. Adler, “This Pre-War Generation,” *Harpers*, October 1940.

Proponents of both liberal and general education argued that such a “cafeteria” style education served neither the student nor the nation. They contended that what was needed was a new curriculum that would provide “unity.” Such unity seemed to have several virtues. It would connect the various fields of knowledge to each other, it would connect academic study to the life of the individual student, and it would provide a means of forging stronger bonds between citizens and between individuals and society.¹⁰

Although advocates of both liberal education and general education identified some common foes, these foes were not the same. The liberal education movement had developed in the late nineteenth century and was oriented toward cultivating an elite through humanistic study of great works of literature.¹¹ On the other hand, the general education movement, developed in the 1930s, consciously distinguished itself from liberal education and sought to produce not cultured gentlemen, but capable citizens. Its account of democracy was less elitist and less hierarchical and it did not identify the developments of modernity, science, or technology as destroying cultivation so much as dissolving cultural unity.

As numerous contemporary educators agreed, the pedagogical values of there were two leading visions of liberal general education diverged.¹² The first group (advocates of liberal education) was committed to education through teaching the classics and to instructing students in “the truth” rather than in how to discover it. The second group (advocates of general education) urged teaching methods that would be scientific, often student centered, progressive, secular, and modern. It emphasized the relative (pragmatic) nature of truth. Knowledge was to be used for practical ends.¹³ On the content side, advocates of general education emphasized (or included) science and technology, while the first group emphasized religion, philosophy (especially

¹⁰ Alvin C. Eurich, “A Renewed Emphasis Upon General Education,” in *General Education in the American College: Thirty-Eight Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, ed. Guy Montrose Whipple (Bloomington, Illinois: Public School Publishing Co., 1939), 7.

¹¹ Rudolph, *Curriculum*, 188; Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University*, 186.

¹² Raphael Demos, “Philosophical Aspects of the Recent Harvard Report on Education,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 7, no. 2 (1946): 187-213; Eurich, “A Renewed Emphasis.”; Malcolm S. MacLean, “Conflicting Theories of General Education,” in *The American College*, ed. P.F. Valentine (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949); H.T. Morse, “The Setting of the Minnesota Conference,” in *General Education in Transition: A Look Ahead*, ed. H.T. Morse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1951).

¹³ B. Lamar Johnson, “General Education Changes the College,” *Journal of Higher Education*, 1938, 9, 18-22.

metaphysics), and literature. The range of pedagogical approaches to liberal or general education was a microcosm of a more wide-ranging and heated debate over the proper ends and methods of education. So hot were the debates that members of each group charged the others with fascism and authoritarianism or, at the minimum, representing a philosophical position that had enabled the rise of fascism.¹⁴

Members of both groups were dissatisfied with curricula organized around disciplinary knowledge, but the reasons for their dissatisfaction were quite different. In the 1930s advocates of liberal education included Mark Van Doren of Columbia, Robert Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, and philosopher Mortimer Adler. They found fault with the narrowness of disciplines, with the materialistic and unintellectual nature of professional education, and with the loss of contact with the classical great works. They took the recent developments in science and technology as either peripheral or inimical to the kind of humanistic liberal arts education they sought.¹⁵ For these men and their allies, the core of a liberal arts curriculum needed to be rooted in the study of the great books and the celebration of Western culture. Indeed, for each of these men, contact with the great books curriculum originated in a class organized by John Erskine during World War I, with the purpose of teaching soldiers to be what they were fighting for.¹⁶

On the other hand, early proponents of general education disapproved of the gap between traditional education and student needs. They saw strictly academic curricula as disconnected from the needs of the individual students, as elitist, and as insufficiently aware of the differences in student interests and abilities. The early proponents of “general education” called for curricula to serve students more directly by addressing practical and contemporary issues or through offering an educational experience that give each student an individualized curriculum “unified” by the

¹⁴ *The Authoritarian Attempt to Capture Education: Papers from the Second Conference on the Scientific Spirit and Democratic Faith*, (New York: King's Crown Press, 1945); James Burkhart Gilbert, “A World without John Dewey,” in *Redeeming Culture: American Religion in an Age of Science* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Edward A. Purcell, Jr., *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism & the Problem of Values* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972).

¹⁵ E.g. Hutchins, “What Is a General Education?” Although in this article Hutchins advocated “general education”, the program he advocate here and elsewhere were typically identified as “liberal” rather than general.

¹⁶ For discussion of how Adler came in contact with the Columbia curriculum and then introduced it to Hutchins see Mary Ann Dzuback, *Robert M. Hutchins: Portrait of an Educator* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). For the martial history of the Columbia curriculum see Timothy P. Cross, *An Oasis of Order: The Core Curriculum at Columbia College* (New York: Office of the Dean, Columbia College, 1995).

particular interests of that student.¹⁷ Proponents of general education took their own approach to be more “democratic” because it could, they held, address the needs of the entire population rather than only those interested in and prepared to read the great books of the Western world.

This is not to argue that one or the other group necessarily devoted energy to defending all of the aspects of its vision of education. Instead, it happened that each element of the vision stood as a metonym for the entire vision. Thus a defender of rationalism like University of Chicago’s Robert Hutchins did not focus on supporting a religious mission in education. However, despite the non-denominational nature of his work, his arguments about the necessity of rationalism and metaphysics in education made him both an ally of Catholic educators and an opponent of such intellectuals as John Dewey and Sidney Hook who supported the scientific, empirical approach to education. This split in pedagogical view mirrored the division that that occurred at the Conference of Science, Philosophy and Religion. Indeed, many of the same players participated in both the conference and in the debate over education.

In 1943, James Bryant Conant, president of Harvard and future head of the EPC, joined this debate by establishing a committee to develop a general education program that would serve the needs of post-war America. At the time he was serving as the chairman of the National Defense Research Council [NDRC] of the Office of Scientific Research and Development [OSRD], which was devoted to developing weapons, including the atomic bomb, for prosecuting the war.

Between his trips to Washington, D.C., to oversee the Manhattan Project and other war-time scientific developments, Conant turned his thoughts to reshaping American through educational reform. Drawing an analogy to the war-time service of scientists like himself, Conant thought of putting faculty not so directly involved in the war effort to work securing the peace. These faculty would shape the post-war nation by defining what the objectives of general education in a free society should be.¹⁸

¹⁷ Johnson, “General Education Changes the College.”

¹⁸ James B. Conant, *My Several Lives: Memoirs of a Social Inventor* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 364

Over the course of the next two and a half years, the committee Conant formed often met several times a week for several hours a session.¹⁹ Discussions and reports during these meetings drew on the views and testimony of over 75 consultants who ranged from state and city commissioners of education to prep school headmasters, sociologists specializing in education, theologians, and union representatives. The transcripts of these meetings provide a window onto mid-twentieth century views of what the proper shape of democracy was and what kinds of citizens would help bring that vision into being.

In their discussions and final report, the committee members and their consultants considered and ultimately sought to offer a final answer to the problem of national unity. Because this committee's work was a relatively late entry to the discussion on general education, because participants in the effort sought to make their activities as synthetic of prior activities as possible, and because the committee preserved the day-to-day and even minute-to-minute record of their activities, this report offers a unique picture of the social thought of mid-twentieth-century America.

The records of these meetings display a more candid, less carefully edited and measured view of education and democracy than those prepared for publication. Transcripts of these meetings also provide an archive of social thought by individuals who, whether because of their field of specialty or because of their social position, left no other record of their ideas or of their vision of what constituted citizenship and the good society.

In its meetings and final report, the committee articulated an ambitious pedagogical philosophy for the nation. To its account of democracy and definition of right-minded citizenship, the committee added chapters on curricula for all colleges and high schools and for Harvard in particular. Its final report, *General Education in a Free Society*, encapsulated social and cultural values, visions of citizenship, and its hopes for American society. The transcripts of hundreds of hours of discussion display how the committee and its consultants imagined a diverse society unified by the mental skills of each American. The vision articulated in the final report, as with those of other

¹⁹ The report's authors were Paul Buck, John Finley, Raphael Demos, Leigh Hoadley, Byron Hollinshead, Wilbur Jordan, I.A. Richards, Philip Rulon, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., Robert Ulich, George Wald, and Benjamin Wright. John Dunlop, John Gauss, Howard Jones, Alfred Simpson, and Howard Wilson were committee members for part of the time. Cf. *General Education in a Free Society*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945), xix.

general education programs, contained both plans for the country's future and a method for achieving it through shaping students' minds. This account provides, in addition, a political vision for how America could remain a democracy even while fundamental social functions were removed from the sphere of politics and public deliberation to be managed by experts or state bureaucracies.

In their discussions, committee members and consultants expounded on their views of the United States, democracy, social relations, the proper way to think, the good life, and the best ways to teach and learn. Their views on these topics drew on an eclectic range of sources, from personal beliefs and knowledge of American history and society to normative epistemology, classical history, and philosophy. The committee members referred to themselves – and expressed pride in their status – as general intellectuals, not as educational experts. The product of their work would therefore represent the joint effort of intellectuals whose particular areas of knowledge lay outside of pedagogy *per se*.

This is not to say that the committee members were dilators. For instance, historians Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and Paul Buck offered their knowledge of American society past and present. Classicists John Finley and Raphael Demos offered background on Greek education, democracy, and the Aristotelian view of the contribution of education to citizenship and the “good life.” Consultants Robert Havighurst and Byron Hollinshead offered their expertise on the relationship of curriculum to social structure. Other consultants offered their knowledge on the effects of economic conditions and demography on high schools and colleges, on conditions in local schools in upstate New York and Ohio, and on the particular needs of labor unions and engineering firms for well-rounded workers.

Ultimately, they were confident enough in their own intelligence, knowledge, judgment, and wisdom on matters of democracy, education, and citizenship to base their proposal for reshaping American society largely on their individual and collective views. However they did periodically, though not frequently, rely on the thoughts and ideas of those outside the room. The most recurrent sources of authority the committee looked to in these matters were the ancient Greeks and the resident Harvard philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. These figures were held in sufficient respect that the committee members, including Paul Buck and John Finley, respectively its chair and

vice-chair, reverentially called on their ideas to support particular views that were under discussion.²⁰

Others who appeared in discussion were such figures as Thomas Jefferson, Karl Marx, Karl Mannheim, the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, the Renaissance humanist scholar and theologian Desiderius Erasmus, and the ancient Roman master of rhetorical education Quintilian.²¹

However, faced with the question of the relationship of democracy and education, the committee gave short shrift to one prominent and contemporary figure whose work concerned precisely this issue: John Dewey. In hundreds of hours of discussion, as well as in numerous reports and memos, the only time John Dewey made a significant appearance was in a report by Robert Ulich, a professor of education. Ulich examined the history of pedagogical philosophy since the ancient world. In that context Dewey figured as only one of numerous educational philosophers, only to be swiftly dismissed. Ulich commented, “Through basing education on merely instrumentalist concepts [Dewey] gives no philosophically satisfying answer to the problem of values and goals of both education and democracy.”²² This rather casual dismissal of Dewey, which was received with no objection, indicates the extent to which the committee and its consultants were largely content to approach social thought, philosophy, education, and democracy through their own knowledge.

By the time its discussions had been polished for public consumption in the published form of *General Education in a Free Society*, the committee had to some degree modulated its private dismissal of Dewey. On the one hand, the book the committee ultimately produced was structured to present a measured synthesis of the existing—polarized—positions on education. These included the views of Dewey and his followers, who adopted a scientific or pragmatic approach, as opposed to an educational philosophy that centered on the Western tradition and the great books. In part, this effort at synthesis involved the argument that the empirical approach central to pragmatism was

²⁰ Serial # 10, September 7, 1943; Serial 339, November 2, 1943; Serial #49, November 12, 1943; Serial # 56, November 18, 1943; Serial #60, November 30, 1943. Records of the Committee on General Education in a Free Society, HUA. Hereafter all citations serial numbers in this chapter refer to the records of this committee.

²¹ Serial #31, October 28, 1943; Serial #41, November 4, 1943; Serial #60, November 30, 1943; Robert Ulich at the Meeting of the Committee, February 23, 1943.

²² The other figures discussed included Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Quintilian, John Amos Comenius, William Petty, Samuel Hartlib, John Locke, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Herbart, Froebel, and Emerson. Robert Ulich, February 16 and 23, 1943.

well rooted in the Western tradition. On the other hand, although the authors were at pains to give a fair account of pragmatism, *General Education in a Free Society* also questioned the effort to use the scientific approach in all domains of human affairs.

This questioning of the “pragmatist solution” occurred in the context of an argument that placed it as one of four existing ways to unite a curriculum. The other methods were the program (offered mostly by Catholic colleges) that sought to provide unity through Christianity, a liberal arts program based on the Western tradition, and, finally, a curriculum based on the practical problems of modern life. This final option was one that many read as “Deweyan” or “progressive.” All four approaches were deemed insufficient as unifying principles for American general education. They were listed as mere preambles to, and foils for, the synthetic program advocated by Harvard’s committee.²³

THE MIND AS SYNTHESIS

The Harvard committee and its consultants sought to find a resolution between the two primary approaches to education, the rationalistic and religious on the one hand and the scientific and pragmatic on the other. The committee and its consultants argued that the various competing positions of general education could be synthesized because they all shared a belief in the “human spirit” and “human dignity.”²⁴ Because this humanism was supposedly shared by all versions of educational theory, the committee suggested following the “American spirit” of compromise and proposed “cooperation on the level of action irrespective of agreement on ultimates.”²⁵ This meant working directly toward developing the minds of students (this was the level of action) regardless of the manner of justifying such activity – whether religious and traditional, or modern and scientific.

Synthesis would be achieved by making a certain kind of mentality rather than specific books, the scientific method, or the particular aspects of modern life the center of general education. What was the mentality to be molded? It was one which de-emphasized knowledge and instead saw education as the training of mental skills.²⁶ The report envisioned Americans unified one with the

²³ See *General Education in a Free Society*, p. 40.

²⁴ Demos, “Philosophical Aspects,” 193; *General Education in a Free Society*, 41-46.

²⁵ *General Education in a Free Society*, 41.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 59, 64-66, 79-80, 190.

other through the shared mental skills of effective thinking, judgment, communication, and the ability “to discriminate among values.”²⁷

To understand this point about the preference for skills over knowledge, it helps to see how the Harvard committee came to a consensus that common knowledge was *not* an essential part of general education. This was a hard-won decision. Members of the committee and their consultants had begun with the commitment that general education necessarily involved unifying the curriculum by giving students shared knowledge.²⁸ This view reflected a position long held the advocates of liberal education who equated unity of curriculum with cultural and political unity.²⁹

Despite repeated efforts at resolution over several months in late 1943, the committee members were unable to agree on a curriculum that would be suitable as a common core of knowledge.³⁰ Although they started from a position similar to that promoted by Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler, unlike Hutchins and Adler, the committee at Harvard and its consultants were unable to either agree on a set of canonical works that would be a core of their own curriculum. They were also unwilling to treat the work of modern science as either peripheral to general education or to reduce modern science to a set of timeless principles as Robert Hutchins had advocated.³¹

Ultimately the Harvard committee and its consultants turned their own failure of consensus on necessary common knowledge from a problem into solution for the nation’s lack of unity. Testimony on American social conditions led the committee to conclude that the traditional liberal arts curriculum was inappropriate for many students.³² For that reason a truly democratic general education could not have a set curriculum. As Alonso Grace, Connecticut commissioner of public education, put it in the committee discussions, diversity of student abilities and interests demanded a “flexible” general education curriculum.³³ For that reason, the lack of a common core of knowledge

²⁷ Ibid., 65.

²⁸ Serial #29, October 28, 1943.

²⁹ Hutchins, “What Is a General Education?”

³⁰ Serial #39, November 2, 1943; Serial #68, December 9, 1943, p.5.

³¹ Hutchins, “What Is a General Education?,” 606.

³² *General Education in a Free Society*, 100, 191.

³³ Serial #4, July 27, 1943.

became not a problem but a solution for American diversity. A “flexible” general education would unify Americans without requiring that they all read the same books.

This position developed out of attention to several features of modern American society. First, it involved the committee’s recognition of social stratification, especially along lines of class, and individual differences in scholastic ability. Second, recognition of the diversity of modern American life meant attention to the increasing role of specialization of knowledge as a “centrifugal” force in modern society.³⁴ Third, it meant that the committee recognized the position of progressive educators who advocated general education as a process of instruction in the issues and affairs of modern life rather than as cultivation through exposure to the great works of the past.

As Harry Gilson, the Maine commissioner of education, argued, what was important in general education was the method of analysis and mode of thinking that students learned, not the specific works they studied.³⁵ In the final report, the committee incorporated these views by noting “general education must accordingly be conceived less as a specific set of books to be read or courses to be given, than as a concern for certain goals of knowledge.”³⁶ By taking this position the committee opposed the educational philosophy that promoted liberal education through the great books. When it adopted this view, the Harvard committee tilted toward progressive educators at schools ranging from the University of Minnesota to Sarah Lawrence College who called for general education to bring unity to students’ lives through coursework that directly connected the classroom to students’ individual interests or practical affairs of modern life.

The committee’s difficulties with knowledge as a goal of education extended beyond shared or core curriculum to survey courses. For instance, Paul Buck and John Finley specifically criticized the survey courses at the University of Chicago for substituting instruction in thinly spread “inert information” with what should be the goal of education: development of mental skills such as “ratiocination.”³⁷

³⁴ *General Education in a Free Society*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945), 38, 53.

³⁵ Serial #4, July 27, 1943. pp.4-5.

³⁶ *General Education in a Free Society*, 79-80. See also p. 106.

³⁷ Serial #56, November 18, 1943.

The committee's curricular suggestions in its final report therefore consistently expressed similar preference for skills over knowledge.³⁸ It suggested that high school English classes should be taught with fewer rather than more books so that more time could be spent on analysis. In addition, no particular specific set of books was to form the curriculum. Both of these suggestions were aimed at helping students develop general skills in reading and analyzing literature rather than acquiring knowledge of the content of the literature.³⁹

The view that a specific and set curriculum was not what was important in education echoed the results of other important curricular studies of the period. In 1944, the EPC published a report on *Education for All American Youth*. The report was an exercise in speculative futurism written in the form of a history of curricular change from 1945 to 1955. As the EPC imagined it, one of the most significant changes that people in 1955 would appreciate was a movement away from prescribed sequences of high schools courses in favor of focus on developing general mental abilities.⁴⁰

The Progressive Educational Association's "Eight-Year Study" had advanced a similar perspective in 1942. This research program had enrolled 30 high schools that had committed to varied levels of curricular reform. The study examined student progress through the four years of high school and their subsequent four years of college. One significant result of the study was that there was no particular high school curriculum necessary for success in college. Indeed, it turned out that students who had been educated in non-traditional high schools received slightly higher grades in colleges than their peers. The report argued that what was important was the kind of mind students developed. The specifics of what they read or studied were less important. College admission officers, including Harvard's, ratified this perspective by concluding that they could choose its entering class even without a set high school curriculum.⁴¹

³⁸ "...encyclopedism is not enough..." *General Education in a Free Society*, 98.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

⁴⁰ Educational Policies Commission, *Education for All American Youth* (Washington, D.C.: Educational Policies Commission, National Education Association of the United States, and the American Association of School Administrators, 1944), 51-52.

⁴¹ Wilford Merton Aikin, *The Story of the Eight-Year Study: With Conclusions and Recommendations* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), part 4.

ENVISIONING SOCIETY

As David Lilienthal had warned, modern society was inevitably faced with centrifugal effects produced by discrete modes of knowledge. And if these forces could not be countered by a common liberal arts curriculum for the entire nation, what then could help hold society together? What would provide the form of cultural unity that the free world needed? The answer lay, on the one hand, on shared mental skills. On the other hand, it lay in a very particular vision of society, the kind of society that could be unified by mental traits.

As the committee and its consultants saw it, American society was complex and internally differentiated into “myriad smaller societies.”⁴² The committee therefore accepted and embraced the idea of diversity in American society and called for general education to have numerous forms to reflect this fact. But it was still faced with the problem of achieving national unity in face of this diversity.

The answer to the problem of centrifugal forces was a mental skill: communication. For the committee, common culture and even society itself were products of communication. Therefore it was misguided to center education on the inculcation of common culture. Instead the goal should be to strengthen that which created society and which produced common culture – communication itself.⁴³

That “communication” was a primary method for tackling social divisions pointed the committee in a specific curricular direction. If students around the nation would not share a common curriculum, they would need, at the minimum to share a “common language.” Such emphasis on “common language” meant eschewing purely vocational education as a curricular path for general education. As one of consultant noted, “[W]e must have a common language with which to speak group to group – therefore the curriculum must have something in common. If you shunt a person into purely vocational training he loses his faith in the opportunities of democracy.”⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., 98.

⁴³ Raphael Demos, “The Art of Communication or Rhetoric,” Supplement 18A, pp.7-8; Raphael Demos, “Society and the Ethics of Individualism,” *The Philosophical Review*, 1945, 54, no. 2, 105.

⁴⁴ Serial #28, October 26,1943.

Allen King, the supervisor of social studies for Cleveland's Board of Education, made the same point by arguing that vocational education was both narrow and had "no place" in general education.⁴⁵ Instead of "regimentation" into specific careers, general education should seek to produce citizens with broad, not narrow, minds. While this rejection of common learning moved the committee away from the model of liberal education based on the great books, focus on "common language" meant eschewing vocational education and the "life-skills" education found in some versions of progressive curricula.

The idea was that if students could be taught a common language, it would be unnecessary to do what the committee had come to believe was impossible: teach them a common body of knowledge. Perhaps counter-intuitively, then, the consequence of interest in communication meant *de-emphasizing* shared knowledge. Instead the focus would be on instilling a common language. Focus on ideas and concepts and skills and thinking therefore was achieved at the expense of slighting vocational education, learning facts, and even a common core of cultural knowledge. This is not to say that the committee did not recognize common knowledge as valuable. However, despite this recognition, the aims and means of achieving general education were not the same as the aims and means of achieving common knowledge.⁴⁶

This commitment to making communication and other fundamental intellectual skills the basis of general education was rooted in a specific vision of the social world that students would enter after their college years. Specifically, the committee understood the modern world as so fundamentally complex that it was not necessary, or even possible, for Americans to share common knowledge. Given the complexity of modern society and the amount of knowledge in the modern world, it seemed clear that no American could achieve comprehensive coverage or expertise.

⁴⁵ Serial #6, August 10, 1943.

⁴⁶ *General Education in a Free Society*, 190. My interpretation on this point differs from that of some previous commentators who, in seeing the call for all Harvard students to take two required classes, understood the committee's philosophy of general education as favoring common knowledge. These interpretations, however, seem to have given insufficient weight to the committee's discussions favoring mental skills in the other five chapters of their report. Moreover, these earlier commentators did not make use of the transcripts of the committee's discussions or their working papers. Daniel Bell, *The Reforming of General Education: The Columbia College Experience in Its National Setting*, (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1966); Phyllis Keller, *Getting at the Core: Curricular Reform at Harvard*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). Further discussion of the skills, not facts, basis of Harvard's own approach to general education can be found in James B. Conant, "Some Aspects of Modern Harvard," *Journal of General Education* 4, no. 3 (1950): 175-83.

To this point, the committee adopted an additional perspective on the nature of expertise. The issue was that so many forms of expertise existed that no person could be a master of all of them. “In this epoch,” wrote the committee, “almost all of us must be experts in some field in order to make a living....” It continued, “I must trust the advice of my doctor, my plumber, my lawyer, my radio repairman, and so on.” By adopting this standpoint, the committee offered an egalitarian perspective on the distribution of expertise but also opened up new problems.

If every American, no matter how intelligent or well educated, needed to rely on other people and on expert knowledge they did not have access to, then how would individuals negotiate the world? What would be the basis of their “trust” in other people’s expertise?

The answer to this question was the core of Harvard’s vision for general education. A society composed of innumerable modes of expertise would be democratic because everyone was an expert. This society would cohere because general education had turned children into citizens of the modern world by giving them the essential mental tools to evaluate expertise in fields not their own. As the committee put it, “[T]he aim of general education may be defined as that of providing the broad critical sense by which to recognize competence in any field.”⁴⁷ Implicit in this view was a belief that all students could acquire such a critical sensibility in school as an essential aspect of training for citizenship in the modern America.

That everyone had different kinds of knowledge and different social roles to play was not a concern, then, because a person who had acquired general education would have the mental skills necessary to negotiate in a world of multiple and differentiated forms of expertise. That skill also provided an additional benefit: the promise of social unity and cohesion.

For the committee it was clear that “there are standards and a style for every type of activity – manual, athletic, intellectual, or artistic, and the educated man should be one who can tell sound from shoddy work outside his own field.”⁴⁸ It was, then, the possession of those standards of judgment that would prevent modern democracy from dissolving.

⁴⁷ *General Education in a Free Society*, 54.

⁴⁸ *General Education in a Free Society*, 54.

This vision of America the United States as a plurality of expertise not only provided a social vision, it also gave its proponents a way of relating the individual to the state. As Raphael Demos noted, the committee's approach to education and thinking was inseparable from a commitment to representative democracy.

Since a single man can not become an expert in the ever so many fields of human endeavor, mastery consists in the ability to recognize and choose the expert. What I call the common or liberal education is just this ability: it is like the ability in democracy to govern ourselves; a layman is not necessarily an expert in government, but he is (or we hope is) an expert in choosing experts in government; he can appoint them, and can dis-appoint them.⁴⁹

By the time this argument reached final form, the committee argued that people should be able to judge experts from any field, so too should they be able to evaluate politicians in their "field" of electoral politics.⁵⁰

This vision of state and society turned voting into a problem of technical evaluation. It also lacked serious consideration of the role that personal preferences, interests, and loyalties would play in voting. By treating the processes of government as one of a rational choice according to a universal standard, this vision made voting one of selecting the "best" candidate where "best" is interpreted as "most qualified" or competent. As such, this conception of proper political action did not recognize interests as legitimate. For instance, this view had little room for dealing with ways that a politician who is "best" for one person is not necessarily "best" for another. Moreover, this conception of democracy implicitly delegitimized personal interests since a voter's choice based on anything other than the candidate's ability to do the job becomes assimilated to illogic, prejudice, or lack of education. This was because there are, according to the committee, "standards...for every type of activity" and those individuals equipped by general education with the proper rational facilities would operate on those universal standards.

But such a vision of society demanded that citizens have basic agreement and consensus about standards by which judgments would be made. If American unity was to be maintained through judgments about good and bad art, science, electrical work, or politics, then what was

⁴⁹ Demos, *supp* 18, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁰ *General Education in a Free Society*, 54.

needed was not simply communication among different kinds of experts as well as between experts and laity, but also a way of assuring that agreement would happen. As the Harvard committee saw it, agreement would be produced by universal standards of judgment.

These standards of judgment would be the basis of American democracy not only by promoting social cohesion, but also by making each individual more free. As the committee put it, “[M]en are not in any sense free to choose unless the fullest possible truth is presented to them. That is to say, freedom is not permission to flout the truth but to regulate your life in knowledge of it.”⁵¹

Learning these essential truths was a critical aspect of what the committee called “an education in liberalism.” To the committee, “education in liberalism” meant education grounded by “truths which none can be free to ignore” and by values such as “faith in human reason” and toleration.⁵² As the committee put it, toleration came from “openness of mind,” which was the mental virtue that produced free society itself.⁵³

Up to this point, those who had made the clearest calls for organizing education around universal values, reason, and deductive thinking were Adler, Hutchins, and religious educators and philosophers. For these people, education in values was to be rooted in metaphysical or religious principles.⁵⁴ Therefore, by taking the position that there was a definite truth to be learned by students, the Harvard committee had affiliated itself with epistemological position of those who promoted education based on the great books or that was rooted in rationalistic, metaphysical, or religious principles. And, as a consequence, it was this particular point that elicited the most strenuous objections from those who objected to religious or metaphysical instruction and instead looked to modern, secular, progressive or “scientific” methods.⁵⁵

But the Harvard committee, while committed to education in values and to instructing in reason over facts, took a firmly secular position and therefore took a middle course between the two

⁵¹ Ibid., 105.

⁵² *General Education in a Free Society*, 50, 57.

⁵³ Ibid., 77

⁵⁴ Cf. Adler, “God and the Professors.”; Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America*. Contemporary criticism of this pedagogy may be found in *The Authoritarian Attempt to Capture Education*; Demos, “Philosophical Aspects.” Useful historical analysis of this debate may be found in Purcell, *Crisis*.

⁵⁵ Bode, “The Harvard Report”; Hook, “Synthesis or Eclecticism.”

main pedagogical camps. For the Harvard committee, the focus would not be on instructing students in how to draw conclusions from eternal metaphysical or religious laws. Instead students were to develop the mental facility of making judgments and “discriminating among values.” On this view, it was not values that were universal, but a specific form of human reasoning ability.⁵⁶

The ability to make a transition from instilling particular religious or metaphysical beliefs to enabling freedom came from the committee’s views on the nature of truth and its relationship to thinking. Specifically, the Harvard committee defined logical thinking as “the capacity to extract universal truths from particular cases and, in turn, to infer particulars from general laws.”⁵⁷ Consequently, a proper education was one that aimed to produce thinking skills including logical thought. Logical thought, in turn, would enable students to reach an understanding of, and belief in, “universal truths.” Since logical thinking involved finding such universals, values could be inculcated by teaching students the processes of logical thought.⁵⁸

A SOCIETY OF EXPERTS

This model of cultivation and evaluative thinking provided a means for imagining the possibility of cohesion in a complex capitalist society. The culture imagined by the committee was not one that would require an ultimate defense of principles beyond the essential qualities of human nature and human talents. The democratic society that the committee imagined would be held together by right-minded people who could speak to and judge one another according to universal rational standards.

The report envisioned Americans unified one with the other through shared and universal mental skills. Through these skills, the American people could be the kinds of citizens necessary for a complex modern democracy. While this social vision expressed the committee’s image the mental, social, and political future of the entire nation, the faith that America was a disparate community of experts held together by the rational abilities of citizens to communicate across the boundaries of expertise was grounded by intimate experience with a specific social environment: Harvard itself.

⁵⁶ For an articulation of the view that students were to be instructed in timeless values see Adler, “This Pre-War Generation.”

⁵⁷ *General Education in a Free Society*, 65.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

As Joel Isaac has demonstrated, Harvard had fostered an environment that located the centers of intellectual activity and even institutional power within interdisciplinary settings. In numerous places — from the junior and senior common rooms in the houses (the undergraduate dormitories modeled on the colleges at Cambridge and Oxford Universities), in the Society of Fellows, in the Faculty Club, in discussion groups and dinner clubs — Harvard culture encouraged faculty and students to engage in intellectual socializing that bridged the disciplines in which they specialized.⁵⁹ In places like the “Shop Club” the elect faculty members shared food, fellowship and dining.⁶⁰

These interdisciplinary settings emphasized the ability of members to speak across the boundaries of disciplinary expertise either by eschewing narrow disciplinary jargon and adopting a language and manner of speech appropriate to a varied audience or by developing a set of theoretical tools that could be applied in several disciplinary contexts. Beyond what they required of speakers, these interdisciplinary environments demanded that other participants, the listeners, be able to evaluate the quality of the speaker’s ideas and intellect. Notably, that evaluation would need to be accomplished by individuals who lacked the particular form of disciplinary expertise possessed by the speaker.

This set of intellectual and social values was perhaps best represented in two institutions that Harvard established in the 1930s: ad hoc committees to evaluate candidates for tenure and the Society of Fellows. After becoming Harvard’s president in 1933, Conant established an up-or-out policy for junior professors. The new system required junior professors to be evaluated not only by the senior members of their own departments, but also by an ad hoc committee of administrators and scholars from outside the department, selected for the occasion. Members of that committee could include both disciplinary specialists as well as intellectuals trusted for their discerning judgment but who were not in the field.⁶¹ The advice of the Ad Hoc committee was then passed

⁵⁹ Joel Isaac, “The Harvard Pareto Circle Revisited” (paper presented at the Cambridge Seminars in Political Thought and Intellectual History, October 27 2008).

⁶⁰ Secondary literature suggests that James Conant founded the Shop Club in 1920s when he was a member of Harvard’s Chemistry Department. However, archival records indicate that there was already a Shop Club of Harvard faculty that dated to at least 1911. HUA, HUD 3787.505.

⁶¹ One instance of inclusion of non-disciplinary specialists ad hoc committees is discussed in James Conant to Paul Buck, 2/20/1951. Papers of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, HUA. Discussion of the establishment of

onto the Dean of the Faculty and President and Fellows of the University, none of whom were presumed to have any disciplinary knowledge about the tenure case, for final determining decisions.

At the Society of Fellows, the ethos of non-disciplinary communication and the faith that non-experts could judge the intellect of people outside their own field was institutionalized in its day-to-day activities and even in modes of selecting members. George Homans and Crane Brinton recount a selection interview where the candidate was told, “[T]his is not an examination. *No one in this room is competent to examine you.* The purpose is for us to get acquainted, and the best way to do that is to talk. So talk!”⁶² Of course, the selection committee *was* examining the candidate and *did* feel itself competent to do so.

The Society had been established after Conant’s predecessor, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, and faculty members Lawrence J. Henderson and Alfred North Whitehead noted that there were not spaces at Harvard for the development of original thought outside what they saw as narrow and even vocational constraints of disciplinary training within departments. The model of intellectual society they sought to emulate was Cambridge University’s Trinity College, its system of Junior Prize Fellowships, and the pattern of social and intellectual life at Cambridge High Table. Whitehead contended that he had always learned most from cross-disciplinary conversation with people he knew well. And so the society established a pattern of encouraging such conversations with required dinners and lunches at which the right kind of interchange would occur.⁶³

Lowell, Henderson, and Whitehead hoped that the Society would play as central a role in Harvard’s culture as the fellowships in Trinity’s culture. The Society’s ideal of combining convivial discussion, fellowship, dining, and intellectual life for elite post-graduates would be expanded to Harvard’s entire undergraduate body with the implementation of the “house” plan for all Harvard undergraduates. The first houses opened in 1930 and the Society of Fellows opened in 1933.⁶⁴

the up-or-out and ad hoc systems can be found in Morton Keller and Phyllis Keller, *Making Harvard Modern: The Rise of America’s University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 64-71.

⁶² George C. Homans, *Coming to My Senses: The Autobiography of a Sociologist* (1984), 121. Emphasis added. The same anecdote appears in Crane Brinton and George Caspar Homans, *The Society of Fellows* (Cambridge; Society of Fellows of Harvard University; distributed by Harvard University Press, 1959), 25.

⁶³ Brinton and Homans, *The Society of Fellows*, 29-31.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5-22. Brinton and Homans discuss how, although the house system was implemented before the founding of the Society, the idea of the society preceded the concrete plan for houses by four years.

It was this conception of intellectual merit and socializing that formed the social vision of the committee on general education. Thus when general education committee member Raphael Demos reflected on the role communication plays as a glue for American society, he drew on his experience of communication in the community at Harvard.

Since it is so concrete itself, conversation thrives when aided by concrete physical things: good food, drink, and smoke, pleasant rooms and comfortable chairs. Surely the opportunity of the Harvard houses, in providing the setting for education conversation, needs no stressing; I have in mind especially the dining rooms (and the common rooms).⁶⁵

Demos's argument about the centrality of common rooms to the community at Harvard played a critical role in the development of the committee's general education proposal not just because it was compelling to the other member of the committee.

This argument was also important because it occurred at a critical juncture in the committee's deliberations. It came as the committee was in the process of developing its account of the form of general education that would enable cohesion in America. Demos suggested the common rooms as way of thinking about America just as the committee was developing its account of the nation as a collection of experts. Thus American democracy could be a plurality of experts that was unified by emulating Harvard's Shop Club, the Society of Fellows, or the Common Rooms, each a place that encouraged cross-disciplinary intellectual banter.

Seeing convivial conversation as the basis for a smoothly functioning society had important consequences for Harvard in the subsequent development of both its general education program after the war as well as the way it structured its own society of scholars. Like the committee on general education he had formed, James Conant saw general education as being directed toward a conversation in a social setting – such as at a cocktail party.

In articulating his vision of how the public should be educated in science, Conant contended that what was important was *not* knowledge scientific facts or the leading edge of scientific research. “Understanding science” meant having a “feel” for the “tactics and strategies” of science. As Conant saw it, it was because scientists trained in any area of science had understanding of strategy

⁶⁵ Raphael Demos, Supplement 18A, p.22.

and tactics. As a consequence they could have a meaningful discussion with scientists trained in all other fields of science. Given the martial nature of Conant's metaphor for understanding it is worth remembering that Conant had personally had just such an experience of interdisciplinary scientific discussions when he served as chairman of the National Defense Research Committee (NDRC) during World War II.⁶⁶ What this view of science meant for general education was that the general population should take classes that would enable them to have a conversation about science by understanding its tactics and strategies.

Subsequently, Conant designed and taught a general education course at Harvard that sought to incorporate these social and pedagogical philosophies. In the introduction *The Copernican Revolution* by Thomas Kuhn, a book that was written for the general education class Conant taught, Conant lauded the kind of knowledge that allowed facility in conversation across disciplines. As he put it, when seeking facility with communication, Conant was not concerned with "a scholarly command of the ancient and modern classics" or even "a sensitive critical judgment of style or form." Instead what he believed that what was important was the kind of "knowledge which can be readily worked into a conversation at a suitable social gathering."⁶⁷ But Conant was quick to point out that the desired knowledge and communication skills were lacking in America – particularly in the domain of the sciences. As he put it, "it is very hard indeed to keep a conversation going about physical science in which the majority of participants are not themselves scientists or engineers."⁶⁸ It was because *The Copernican Revolution* made possible casual banter about science that Conant offered his enthusiastic endorsement of the text.

And this was why Kuhn's book was so important to Conant. It was an example of what general education in the sciences could accomplish for its students and the nation. It would enable the operation of democracy and modern society as envisioned by the Harvard committee on general education. This book would strengthen American society and its democracy by equipping non-scientists with a "working knowledge" of science; that is, knowledge that could "be worked into

⁶⁶ James B. Conant, *On Understanding Science* (New York: New American Library, 1951), 3-4,6. See also James B. Conant, *On Understanding Science: A Historical Approach* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947; reprint, 1951).

⁶⁷ James B. Conant, "Forward," in *The Copernican Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), xiii.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, xv.

conversation at a suitable social gathering.” That possibility, in turn, protected modern America from disunity and from undemocratic rule by experts unaccountable to a public that did not understand them.

What ultimately mattered most to Conant and other advocates of general education was that it was education for freedom and democracy. On this point Conant noted that although education in the disciplines was the same on both sides of the Iron Curtain, it was only the free world that provided its students with the general education that equipped them with the mindset to be citizens in a democracy.⁶⁹

CONCLUSION

What Harvard University produced in its general education report (known as the “Red Book” for the color of its cover) was remarkably insular and informed by the specific local institutional intellectual culture even though it was a product of input from 75 consultants from outside of Harvard. The final report crystallized and propagated several important strains of liberal social thought that would be central to the post-war period.

The Red Book drew attention in part simply because it had been produced by Harvard and because James Conant was already a national leader on the relationship of education to society. But the impact of the report was also helped by how many people read or bought it. Harvard itself financed sending copies of the book to educational leaders and policy makers. The book drew reviews in the popular press, including the *New York Times*, and sold over 40,000 copies in five years.⁷⁰

Only a year later, when the *Journal of General Education* was launched at the University of Iowa, the Harvard report on general education became a — if not the — primary framework for consideration of general education in the pages of the journal. The prominence of Harvard in the pages of the journal was certainly helped by the fact that the editor, Earl McGrath, made Harvard’s vision of general education his primary and often sole point of reference.⁷¹

⁶⁹ James B Conant, “Some Aspects of Modern Harvard,” *Journal of General Education* 4, no. 3 (1950): 175-83, 180.

⁷⁰ Keller and Keller, *Making Harvard Modern*, 44.

⁷¹ See, for instance, the editorial that inaugurated the journal. Earl J. McGrath, “The General Education Movement,” *Journal of General Education* 1, no. 1 (1946): 3-8.

By 1949, McGrath had resigned as editor of the journal. But as he moved to serve as U.S. commissioner of education, McGrath's views on pedagogy and society would continue to be influential.⁷² Into the 1950s, other educators continued to treat Harvard's vision of general education as a significant synthesis of existing approaches to general education.⁷³

The vision the Red Book advanced of American society and its democracy, as well as its take on liberalism, was simultaneously egalitarian and elitist in a number of ways. First, the Red Book's emphasis on intellectual attributes rather than course content was expressed in egalitarian terms. This was because the book underlined a commitment to the view that all Americans had a claim on the virtues of citizenship regardless of whether or not they had attended a school that taught from the great books.

This view echoed James Conant's long-held position that individual merit should not be assessed on the basis of what people knew, but how well they could think. Conant's position was based on his noting that colleges that required specific courses, such as Ancient Greek, from their applicants were not selecting the most intelligent student body. Rather, as Conant saw it, such colleges were simply selecting students who were wealthy enough to attend the private schools that offered such curricula.

Because of this commitment to ability over knowledge, Conant changed Harvard's admissions policy to focus on intellectual ability, authored a number of works on the importance of selecting students on the basis of merit not wealth, and, perhaps most importantly, was instrumental in supporting the development of Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), a primary way that Harvard and other colleges and universities came to choose their student bodies. The SAT, modeled on IQ tests, was most specifically not a test of knowledge. Instead, it was designed, marketed, and used as a test of aptitude for future performance.⁷⁴

⁷² Reuben Frodin, "Editorial Comment," *Ibid.* 3, no. 3 (1949): 161-62.

⁷³ Harold Taylor, "The Philosophical Foundations of General Education," in *Fifty First Year Book of the National Society for the Study of Education*, ed. Nelson B. Henry (Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 1952), 30-35; Daniel Bell, *The Reforming of General Education: The Columbia College Experience in Its National Setting* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1966), 38.

⁷⁴ Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1999).

However, Harvard and other institutions of higher learning did not move completely to a system of choosing members on the basis of pure intellect, divorced from social and class matters. Harvard and other elite universities adopted the SAT as only one way of selecting their entering classes. In order to insure that their student body did not have too many people of the wrong class or religious background, Ivy League schools seeking to maintain their connections to the WASP aristocracy, assiduously made sure to evaluate and admit applicants on criteria beyond pure intellectual merit.⁷⁵

While such methods of selecting the student body displayed a continued attachment to social class and religion, the very nature of IQ tests and, by extension, the SAT, also kept schools chained to a tool that itself selected not only for disembodied intellect, but also for a combination of class and cultural cultivation. This was because the SAT was and still is correlated with socioeconomic status and race as well as with what it advertises itself as predicting: grades in the first year of college.⁷⁶

As with its commitment to intellectual skills over knowledge, the Red Book's vision of America as akin to the Society of Fellows or the Harvard Common Rooms and as rooted in a learning environment with "pleasant rooms" and "comfortable chairs" had both elitist, parochial elements and an egalitarian sensibility. On the one hand, this perspective on the good society reached a wider circle than those who wrote and read the Harvard report itself. For instance, the Educational Policies Commission's book, *Education for All American Youth*, pictured communities all across the country centered not just on schools, but on schools equipped with rooms designed to increase education through specific creature comforts. These rooms would have "panelled [sic] walls, built-in bookshelves, indirect lighting, and pleasing harmony of colors." The "beauty" of the room would be "enhanced by the furnishings—the large tables and comfortable library chairs, the draperies, rugs, and floor lamps, the vases of flowers from the school garden, and the half dozen prints and paintings which hang upon the walls."⁷⁷ Such spaces would promote learning of

⁷⁵ Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

⁷⁶ Lemann, *The Big Test*.

⁷⁷ Educational Policies Commission, *Education for All American Youth*, 135-37.

humanistic subjects and the schools with such spaces would serve as a civic hub for the larger community. Where the Harvard vision was that its own common rooms would be the model for American society, for the EPC the basis of American society would be a well-appointed room in a rural high school.

Both perspectives were egalitarian in their arguments that a comfortable life of the mind would be accessible to all Americans. On the other hand, much less clear is whether that vision of society was either realistic or could be shared on an equal basis by all people since some individuals are more talented than others in the kinds of kinds of speech and interdisciplinary discourse appropriate to such a setting. To the extent, then, that the proper forms of discourse were not equally distributed across the population, the common room as a model of America was not egalitarian but hierarchical.⁷⁸ Collegiate common rooms and well-appointed high schools would, then, be places of both intellectual and social distinction. James Conant's view on the GI bill underlines this point. That Conant initially opposed the bill on the grounds that large numbers of Americans were ill suited for college suggests that they would thus not be full participants in the kind of democracy modeled on the social interactions in Harvard Common Rooms.⁷⁹

The Red Book's account of American society had a third deep thread that was both egalitarian and hierarchical. This thread was the America imagined as composed of experts. This view was egalitarian in the sense that everyone was some kind of expert. Even if some experts – namely, those who were talented enough to actually attend the common room – were more esteemed than the experts who were not admitted to the common room, nevertheless everyone was a particular type of expert.

This position allowed expertise to fall across the socioeconomic spectrum. However, this view also possessed a particular blindness. The diversity discussed in the Red Book and by the Harvard committee was one of a diversity of disciplines – which was why the common room was so

⁷⁸ The issue of differential cognitive and linguistic abilities and their effect on democracy are addressed in Janusz Reykowski, "Deliberative Democracy and 'Human Nature': An Empirical Approach," *Political Psychology* 27, no. 3 (2006): 323-46; Shawn Rosenberg, "Reason, Communicative Competence and Democratic Deliberation: Can Citizens Effectively Participate in Deliberative Decision-Making?" (paper presented at the Annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA, August 27 2003).

⁷⁹ On Conant's opposition to the GI bill see Lemann, *The Big Test*, 59.

central to their vision of America. On this account, a person's identity was defined by his profession. As a consequence of this framework, citizenship would operate in terms of professional affiliation. This was a view of society that slighted women, who were presumed not to have professions.

While the use of profession as the definition of social and political identity made women invisible as citizens, the use of the common room as a metaphor of society also made the Red Book silent on significant social issues. Left almost entirely unmentioned in two years of committee discussions was the issue of ethnic and racial differences and the potential uses of general education's civic purpose to promote tolerance across lines of ethnicity and race. Then again, this purpose was discussed in other educational manifestos of the time. For instance, the EPC treated the appreciation of the talents and skills of other people as akin to respecting members of minority groups. While this way of phrasing the issue made minorities into "others," it nevertheless recognized social integration as a national value.⁸⁰

For its part, the President's Commission on Higher Education advocated desegregation of colleges and framed tolerance as an issue of "inter-race and inter-faith fellowship." In contrast, "tolerance" in the Red Book meant "openness of mind" and "freedom of inquiry." And when the Red Book addressed "problems of difference," it focused on differences in such matters as native intelligence and school funding.⁸¹ That the Red Book would be so silent on matters of race is remarkable given that Gunnar Myrdal's important study on the topic had appeared only a year earlier.⁸²

The Red Book also marked a transition in the way that intellectuals discussed the relationship of school to democracy. Most specifically, leading intellectuals were moving away from recognizing John Dewey's theories as a necessary component of such analysis. The authors of this book—as well as individuals such as Conant, who directly influenced its composition—critiqued the

⁸⁰ Educational Policies Commission, *Education for All American Youth*, 79.

⁸¹ *General Education in a Free Society*, 77, 79-91; United States President's Commission on Higher Education and George Frederick Zook, *Higher Education for American Democracy, a Report* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1947), Volume 2, p. 26.

⁸² Gunnar Myrdal, Richard Mauritz Edvard Sterner, and Arnold Rose, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1944).

pragmatic viewpoint by arguing that domains including value judgments are not directly accessible by science. Because of arguments such as these, the book drew negative reviews from progressive educators and Dewey's disciples, who saw such assertions as ratification of what they identified as the religious, traditional, and authoritarian approach to education.⁸³ At the same time, perhaps a marker of its success in achieving the middle ground it had sought to hold, the Red Book drew criticism from conservatives such as William F. Buckley for essentially removing all role for religion in education. Buckley took the omission to be ominous since, in his estimation, the Red Book was one of two widely circulated accounts of higher education. The other was the report of the President's Commission on Higher Education, *Higher Education in American Democracy*, which Buckley also criticized for its omission of religion.⁸⁴

In subsequent years, Harvard's Committee on General Education was joined by other social scientists, intellectuals, and administrators of the National Academy of Sciences and the National Science Foundation who likewise either ignored Dewey or raised his name in order to highlight his errors and the obsolescence of his ideas about science, education, and American U.S. society. Through the 1950s and into the 1960s, as science came to be linked to technocratic liberalism of the sort imagined by the Harvard committee on general education, the word "Deweyan" was, to many leading scientists, an epithet used to damn educational programs they deemed rigid or insufficiently aware of the true nature of science.⁸⁵ By this point, debate over scientific method was largely controlled either by philosophers of the logical empiricist camp who increasingly treated discussion of the political implications of science as peripheral to philosophy, or by natural scientists who often simply ignored philosophers.⁸⁶

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 154–155, 54. For some negative reviews of *General Education in a Free Society* see Boyd H. Bode, "The Harvard Report," *J. Higher Edu.*, 1946, 17:1–8; Hook, "Synthesis or Eclecticism"; and Harold Taylor, "Philosophical Aspects of the Harvard Report," *Phil. Phenomenolog. Res.*, 1946, 7:226–239.

⁸⁴ William F. Buckley, *God and Man at Yale; the Superstitions of Academic Freedom* (Chicago: Regnery, 1951), 38–41.

⁸⁵ E.g., Henry David Aiken, "Revaluations: John Dewey's Darwinism," *New York Review of Books*, 22 Apr. 1965; Jerome S. Bruner, *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 113–126; and Rostow, "National Style", p. 309. On "Deweyan" as an epithet see John L. Rudolph, *Scientists in the Classroom: The Cold War Reconstruction of American Science Education* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 120.

⁸⁶ For discussion of how this transformation was conditioned by both professionalization and the effects of a restrictive political climate on social thought see Philip Mirowski, "The Scientific Dimensions of Social Knowledge and Their Distant Echoes in 20th-Century American Philosophy of Science," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 35, no. 2 (2003): 283–326; George Reisch, *How the Cold War Transformed Philosophy of Science: To the Icy Slopes of Logic* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Criticism of Mirowski can be found in Amadae and Richardson.

However deep their debts to Dewey, his ideas, and the secular program for intellectual life he advocated, by the 1950s many intellectuals did not acknowledge him as the inspiration that he was either to their predecessors or to their followers.⁸⁷ The modern liberal democracy portrayed in the Red Book was not the society imagined and called for by John Dewey. Instead of locating the power and knowledge for social change in individuals and small communities, the future imagined in *General Education in a Free Society* was a technocracy in which each citizen was educated in how to appreciate, judge, and defer to expertise and in which political questions and even voting became technical problems.⁸⁸

The Red Book's technocratic vision fit with the emerging national security state that James Conant, in his role in aiding the development and deployment of the atomic bomb, helped bring into being. The Red Book's vision of free society also fit the social and political order that developed at the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). TVA director David Lilienthal had worried that specialization had been disruptive enough to have been the cause of the world war. However, he, like the authors of the Red Book, found unity and democracy in interdisciplinarity. Thus when he published his account of the TVA, Lilienthal envisioned unification of numerous kinds of expertise on a single farm as "grass roots" democracy.⁸⁹

However, as with the Red Book, Lilienthal's own discussion of democracy contained an undercurrent of anti-egalitarian technocratic elitism. Even by 1944, when Lilienthal published this account, the TVA was already industriously separating the experts with special knowledge from everyone else. Among the projects the TVA took up during World War II was supplying power to the Oak Ridge Laboratory, the enormous industrial plant that enriched uranium for the Manhattan Project and the atomic bomb that was eventually dropped on Hiroshima. After World War II, Lilienthal would go on to help draft a plan for the international control of atomic energy with Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson.⁹⁰ After the plan was undermined by the American delegate

⁸⁷ This point about the success of the secular program in culture and intellectual life is indebted to David A. Hollinger, "Science as a Weapon in *Kulturkämpfe* in the United States During and After World War II," *Isis* 86 (1995): 440-54.

⁸⁸ On the opposition of Dewey and technocracy see Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 454-57.

⁸⁹ Lilienthal, *TVA: Democracy on the March*, 77-92.

⁹⁰ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 54-58.

to the United Nations and rejected by the Soviet Union, Lilienthal went on to be director of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), the civilian agency that oversaw the production of America's nuclear arsenal and its nuclear power industry.

The technocratic national security state that Lilienthal and Conant helped bring into being at the NDRC, TVA, and AEC was not the kind of society that fit well with John Dewey's vision of democracy. It was, however, a kind of society in which graduates of Harvard's plan of general education would be excellent citizens. It would be a system in which democracy, freedom, and natural culture would be unified by faith in and commitment to the human talents of rationality, creativity, tolerance, communication and open-minded inquiry.

Although this set of liberal values celebrated differences in ideas and left room for people to disagree, the question was: when people disagreed, what would happen? With so much invested in *expertise*, no simple vote would resolve disagreement. As the Red Book put it, there was a *Truth* that intelligence and rational inquiry, not voting, would reveal. That answer then shifted the problem to resolving disagreements by determining precisely which person possessed the expertise and rationality to reveal the truth.

This was a liberalism that was egalitarian, meritocratic, and elitist all at the same time. Although rationality, tolerance, creativity, judgment, and open-mindedness were human traits, they were not equally distributed among the population. Some people were, simply, more expert and more rational. For the time being, the people who populated the elite reaches of the policy and intellectual world were comfortable that they could judge who was and who was not the true expert and thus qualified to join common rooms.

When they agreed with one another and while the country was content with their judgments, the fragmentation that had sparked the general education movement was averted and the cultural unity of modern America seemed assured. However, cultural disintegration loomed on the horizon when conversation in the common rooms failed or when the nation could not accept the consensus views that emerged from them.

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