

Politics by Other Means

By Michael W. Kelley

Inside American Education: The Decline, The Deception, The Dogmas, by Thomas Sowell (New York: The Free Press, 1993) 368 pages, notes, index.

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In 1963 R.J. Rushdoony, in the *The Messianic Character of American Education*, commented: “The attitude of people towards education is that it is a god that has failed and yet a god who can perhaps still be whipped into fulfilling his mission.”¹

It might seem strange that 30 years ago anyone should have wished to voice a concern about education and schools that one would have imagined only began to make headlines in the 1980s. Surely, matters were not all that bad then! Since then, however, despite warnings and eloquent pleas, not only has there been no success in correcting this “failure”, but everything which *has* been done has only ensured its completion. Thus, if anything, education is even worse off today!

Speaking almost alone, and with greater vision than most critics at that time, Rushdoony saw why “education” had failed so abysmally—it was because people had come to endow education in the modern world with such god-like pretensions. Education was supposed to be the means for building the perfect society, for solving all the problems of the world, from hunger and malnutrition to wars and every conceivable injustice. Ignorance was regarded as the chief cause of every problem of modern man. But after decades of pouring millions of dollars into education, and creating a vast and far-reaching system of state control, mankind was no closer to solving his problems than when he first set out on his ideological journey. If anything, matters seemed pretty much headed in the opposite direction. Instead of turning out legions of utopia builders, the system has produced generations of increasingly intellectually less competent and academically less qualified—but highly politicized—minds who threatened to produce, not the expected progress, but a “devolution” in our modern societies along with the living standards which we had come complacently to regard as our due. Far from solving our social problems, as it promised, today we seem to have moved even nearer to the abyss of chaos and disorder.

¹ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Messianic Character of American Education*, (Phillpsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1963), p.6.

However, despite the near crisis condition of our modern educational establishment, man's faith in the power of "education" to unlock the secret of human happiness has perhaps been a little ruffled, but hardly shaken. Somehow (no doubt, more money wouldn't hurt!) the mission of his god will succeed.

When most people think of education they immediately think of the "public schools". The obvious reason is because the so-called public, or state-controlled, schools maintain a near total monopoly on all aspects of education in this country. Perhaps 90 per cent of all youth, at the least, have acquired what learning they possess from some tax-supported, bureaucratically-dominated "public" school.

In many people's minds, a public school system exists for the primary purpose of teaching "Johnny" to read, write, and learn those sorts of calculations that will enable him later in life to land a high-paying job. For some, public education is considered necessary because of the alleged socially beneficial results—the high standard of living we enjoy today is dependent upon a continual improvement in technology and science which only large well-endowed educational institutions can afford. People simply expect the schools to prepare their children to acquire the intellectual, and other, skills that will enable them to "succeed" in life. If the children are not gaining these skills, if they are not getting the proper training, then, in the public's perception, a massive "failure" on the part of the schools is the only possible explanation. And the statistics say that the children are, indeed, not getting the proper education they deserve. Even worse, the schools today are increasingly the scenes of crime and violence, of racial tension, drugs, and loose morality, all of which destroy the necessary tranquillity for academic pursuits. People do not regard their basic philosophy of "education" as having failed; they think only that the 'schools' have failed. How to get the schools, then, to do *their* job is the principle focus of the debate.

Classroom Brainwashing

This linking of the "public" school with "education" in the popular perception is responsible for a grave distortion in the public's understanding of what ails the system. When thoughtful people at present think that the decline in education is attributable to something that has gone wrong in the multi-billion dollar institution of 'public' education, they cannot imagine that their faith in the system has been entirely misplaced. Most honestly believed that they enrolled their children in 'public' schools simply to acquire skills and technical know-how in order to succeed in an increasingly complex and uncertain world. If now there is rising anger because the schools are no longer doing an adequate job in this respect, it nevertheless does not seem to occur to anyone that the institution of the "public" school is itself the cause of the failure in education. So while there is much talk about "reform" needed in the system, there is never anything said about getting rid of the system altogether. It must be emphatically asserted, contrary to the pontifications of present-day pundits, educators, public officials, experts, politicians, and concerned parental groups, that the American "public" schools have *not* failed. Although

it flies in the face of much received wisdom (not to mention the statistics), it is necessary to clarify this fact. The “public” school system has not only *not* failed to carry out its mission, but it has succeeded in doing so far beyond anyone's expectation! Indeed, the American public school system today is one of the truly great success stories of American history. Although the state-run school was a German invention, its growth in America has been one of the great examples of a successful cross-cultural fertilization. The public school in America has been one of the most enduring and, if success is measured by a monetary standard, one of America's most prosperous institutions. Indeed, far more money has been siphoned from an unsuspecting public into the system than was ever filched from them by those great “robber” barons of old.

The trouble is that most people do not understand, and perhaps never have understood, what is the purpose of the “public” school. Because we associate the word “school” with “learning” fundamental knowledge, we simply cannot imagine that learning fundamental knowledge has never been anything more than a peripheral aspect of the public school philosophy. The *real* purpose of the public school has little, if anything, to do with an “academic” agenda—its true goal was, and remains, the creation of the *right* kind of human being, one who thinks and acts according to the correct moral (re: humanist!) outlook and with a uniform social consciousness. It was founded to ensure that all citizens in America would be properly indoctrinated to submit to the political will of the state and to whatever social “good” the state saw fit to implement. The goal of public education was to make sure that young, impressionable souls were readily taught to believe that life's problems were not only within man's grasp to solve, but that the only means to realize those solutions was to increase the power of government and to make it all-pervasive in every area of life.² Once it is understood that this has been the only real purpose of “public” education since its beginning some time in the early nineteenth century, it does not take much effort to see that in its hidden, but primary, aim it has been a colossal success. All of which brings us to Thomas Sowell's latest book, *Inside American Education*.

Sowell's is only the most recent in a series of books and articles which have begun to make their appearance since the *Nation at Risk* report around 1983. Those who are familiar with Sowell's writings will no doubt expect a thoroughly researched and documented examination of all dimensions of the American education industry. They will not be disappointed. At the same time, they will be no less inspired by Sowell's often brilliant analyses and characteristically witty replies to the vague, if not utterly stupid, rationales that have been used by liberal-humanist minds who, despite the emptiness of their logic, wish to con the gullible, tax-paying public into continuing to support a system that is all but bankrupt. Sowell is not one to mince words.

Sowell knows full well that the problems of American “public” education have a long past: “The history of American education, from the time when high schools ceased to be a

2 For an in-depth study on the development of the public school philosophy in American education see, Joel Spring, *The American School, 1642-1985*, (New York: Longman, 1986).

place reserved for an academic or social elite, has been a history of a steady displacement, or swamping, of academic subjects by non-academic subjects or academic subjects increasingly watered down.” (p. 98) This goes to the heart of what we stated about the purpose of the public school in America. Its goal has been to shift the moral locus of authority away from God to man and to become an instrument used by governments in creating utopian democratic societies. Traditional, or “academic”, subjects were obstacles in the path of this program. They taught individuals to think and discriminate between various, and often competing, points of view. But democratic utopia necessitated ideological conformity. An individual who thought independently could act as a corrupting influence and thereby undermine the group-think necessary in order to erect the humanist society. Consequently, “academic” subjects either had to be eliminated or modified to ensure that the “non-” or “pseudo-” academic subjects would enable the schools to succeed in indoctrinating the citizens to their proper role - which is, support-on-cue for whatever government program is thought desirable by the political culture. And, if anyone wishes to dispute the success of the public schools in carrying out this agenda, all one needs to do is to take a look around. One will readily observe that the voting patterns are, indeed, in accord with social welfarism and governmentalism of every sort; this, despite the growing anger at the rising tax-burden that accompanies them. This outlook has controlled our governments at all levels for nearly 60 years and will continue to do so unless there occurs a major shift in the moral and religious faith of the people in a greater God-centered (i.e., Word-centered) direction. Indeed, the history to the American public school system has been the history of a long effort to undermine real academics in schools.

At present, Sowell remarks, “...brainwashing has become a major, time-consuming activity in American education at all levels.” (p. 17) In other words, “...every effort is made to re-shape the moral values, personal habits, and social mindsets of American children.” (p. 17) This comports with the non-academic agenda of American public education. When the purpose of education is to “shape attitudes”, then critical thinking is likely to hinder this endeavor. What is more, Sowell is not in doubt that the direction in which this re-shaping is intended to go is towards the “political left”. (p. 98) All values taught in the schools are designed to inculcate moral support for every conceivable “socialist” purpose—from world-hunger crusades to “life-styles”, from abortion-on-demand to saving the ozone layer, and so on. In each case it is implied or explicitly professed that only government can save us from all our problems. World-saving crusades take up the bulk of time spent in the classroom, where time is crucially needed to teach children basic reading, writing, and mathematical abilities. (p. 15)

Public schools have sought to make their agenda truly national in scope. Should any region or area remain free, it would constitute a threat to the system. In every case the same principles must be taught everywhere. Today the national system has devised a program it calls “affective education”. School districts across the country have sought to put it into effect. The goal of affective education is to undermine all centers of authority for life and behavior, for beliefs and convictions other than the individual him- or herself. To re-shape American youth to serve the Baal-state, it is necessary first to empty their

souls of any values or principles not taught them by the school system. A major assault is carried out against all traditional sources of value. As Sowell comments, “The most general—indeed pervasive—principle of these various programs is that decisions are *not* to be made by relying on traditional values passed on by parents or the surrounding society.” (p. 47) Students are thus told that they must determine their own values. But, then, when the student is cut loose from traditional moorings he or she is pressured into accepting as his or her own only those values foisted on them by the schools. “Affective education” makes the pretentious claim that it is based upon sound “scientific” methods. In fact, it is utterly anti-intellectual nonsense. Once again, however, it is enormously successful, as any glance at our modern hedonistic societies should readily make clear.

When students are told to determine their own values, the “affective education” program hastens to add that all values are “relative”. No person's or group's values have any claim to dominate or exclude other people's values. No standard may be applied to discriminate between various cultures. However, if any student should happen to decide that his values are those of Western Christianity and culture, then he can be sure that he will be quickly and vehemently assaulted. There is, says Sowell, a “seething hostility to the West...” (p. 71) While pretending to tolerate all points of view in an open intellectual forum, in fact the “public” school system either flagrantly attacks or intimidates into silence any who do not submit to the prevailing “multi-cultural diversity” dogma. In other words, who do not pay homage to “ideological conformity”!

As the public school system has acquired the power of a government insured monopoly, so the teaching “profession” has emerged as the nation's most powerful union. And like any union, its first priority is to protect itself and to reward itself as it sees fit. Unions do not serve the customer, they exist to promote and advance their own agendas. The teacher's unions which now control the public school are no different. What is more, as a government agency, teacher's unions are thoroughly pervaded with left-liberal values. Politics for them is the chief end of man. They willingly spend great amounts of time endeavoring to extract ever greater amounts of money from the tax-payer. Teacher's unions have “virtually iron-clad job security...” (p. 22) No matter how bad or incompetent any teacher may be, and no matter how many generations of students he (she) ruins, instead of dismissal, says Sowell, that teacher “will be rewarded by continually rising pay levels”. (p. 22) There is almost no way for the public to have any say in this matter. It is strictly a matter for the school-boards whose members are products of the system and who share the same political values as administrators and teachers. In one of his typical witticisms, Sowell responds to the allegation that many teachers have somehow entered the system who do not have the competence academically to succeed in the important job of instructing the next generation and that these deficiencies are the root of the present failure. Far from merely being academically deficient, counters Sowell, the vast legions of teachers today “are not academically *oriented*.” (p. 32) And that is because the whole system is not academically oriented.

Organs of the Left

Inside American Education looks not only at the public grade- and high-school, but also at the “higher” education in the colleges and universities. Here, too, problems and issues follow the same pattern as in the educational system at the lower levels. If anything, matters only get worse when we enter the realms of higher learning. Although the system of state-controlled education is less monolithic at this level, the same “non-academic” agenda is no less pervasive. And while many “private” institutions compete with the government to provide a college education for the youth of America, it should not be thought that therefore greater opportunities exist for escaping the absolutism of humanism and leftism in the colleges and universities. Most private schools are as infected with the virus of radical politics and social revolution as are the state operated universities. The university has long fostered the notion that it stood for an open and free exchange of ideas and cultures; that rational men, by rational means, would resolve the great disputes of life, or would at least willingly admit them to honest debate. Today, there is not even the pretense of maintaining such an “enlightened” agenda in the universities. No point of view is either heard or tolerated but what conforms to the reigning ideological leftism. There is, says Sowell, a systematic pattern of “preventing academic audiences from hearing anything which challenges the prevailing vision of the left currently monopolizing many elite colleges and universities.” (p. 176) This prevention is sometimes officially sanctioned by the administration, sometimes compelled by radical faculty complaints, or, as is more often the case, simply shouted down by roving bands of students whose unwillingness even to listen to anything with which they are in disagreement usually displays itself in behavior that is far from the hallowed ideal of rational and enlightened toleration. However, any issue that appeals to the radical left in these institutions is not only permitted to be heard, but is loudly proclaimed and vociferously demanded with every contempt for civilized decency. Today colleges and universities are solely the organs of leftist political and social ideology, and what students imbibe is a form of hooliganism in support of these.

Besides the politics, a feature of the modern university professoriate is that it is no longer regarded to be a “teaching” profession. Today in universities the job of teaching is reduced to a minor role. The majority of professors do not spend much time in the classroom. Most occupy their time in “research”. At the same time, the universities have built up a system of tenure as a means for those in the system to protect themselves against dismissal for nearly any reason. Tenure as a form of elitism has instilled a sort of labor union closed shop mentality in the academic profession. The effect has been to shield those who achieve this status against accountability for what they teach or how they conduct themselves in their jobs. Tenure means that an irresponsible professorial class can ignore or resist calls for changes in the system, because in most cases where that would be possible it would require massive firings and replacement by more academically competent minds. Instead of universities being required to fill hiring quotas based upon the politics of the moment, they should be free to hire whomever they felt was best fitted for the job of teaching. And all evaluations should be made on that basis, not on some

non-academic requirement to conform to the political culture's notion of multi-cultural inclusiveness.

Despite the reliance upon statistics, Sowell writes with passion and even anger as anyone should who considers the vast waste of money that goes to prop up a system of education that has little to do with learning real knowledge and much to do with inculcating humanism's vapid and society-destroying moral values. However, surprisingly, Sowell nowhere calls for the complete elimination of the system of tax-supported “public” education. Neither does he offer anything in the way of an alternative. While his basic moral point of view is one that would, in general, be shared by most Christians, he does not develop his ethics of learning on any specifically definable Christian (i.e., Biblical) basis. So he doesn't insist that Christianity must come into the picture as the only viable ethical point of view to compare with that of humanism. Nor does he indicate that the responsibility for educating children belongs to the parents—that they must either do it themselves, or hire someone else in the market of education providers.

Still, the book is worth the price of purchase. It provides a thorough disclosure of all aspects of American “public” education, not failing to touch upon anything that has contributed to its decline.