

Education in an Industrial Society

By G. H. Bantock.

Mr. Bantock is concerned with the quality of life in a modern industrial society (Britain) and the role education can play in improving it. (Most of what he says is directly applicable to South Africa). His view is that education is not organised with a view to equipping the individual to deal with the conditions of industrial existence and he describes the barren and soulless nature of the work which the bulk of the population performs daily. The schools are failing to do their duty to the individuals of the society they serve because the education they offer has become shaped by two forces, neither of which exhibits any regard for the inner welfare and happiness of individuals.

The first of these is the ideological demand for social justice. This implies acceptance of the doctrine of equality of opportunity. Translated into educational terms, this means a drab conformity in the material offered and the methods employed because of the fear that someone will be denied his rightful chance. Educationalists have ignored what should be a fundamental principle of policy, namely the recognition of the essential nature and uniqueness of every human being. He asserts that, despite the pleas of the advocates of equality that their aim is a moral one, there is a finer morality implicit in the recognition that all human beings are equal but different. Thus there must be a far wider variety of educational provision, based upon a realistic acceptance of aptitude and ability differences. A watered-down academic curriculum for the less able is particularly ineffective because of their complete inability to benefit from it. The second force operating against a satisfactory educational provision is the demand made upon the schools by the industrial-bureaucratic state. Mr. Bantock denounces the attitude which results in talking about education as though it was some form of commercial or industrial enterprise, aiming primarily to satisfy the demands made upon it through effective training procedures. In addition, education has come to mean money and status and this has resulted in a great demand for academic education by people who are entirely unsuited by virtue of their inferior intellectual equipment.

John Dewey comes in for some scathing criticism in the second chapter where Mr. Bantock is concerned to show that the enormous influence of the former has contributed to the neglect of the inner, affective life in education through Dewey's persistent stressing of social rather than individual aims.

What is the solution to the problem? It lies in a greater concentration on and direction of effort towards the development of the individual's affective life. In a very interesting chapter entitled "The Education of the Less Able Child", ways and means are discussed and the book is worth looking at for this chapter alone. He suggests for example stressing domestic skills for both boys and girls and in the treatment of language would give precedence to drama, mime and song to replace the formal academic treatment which is traditionally employed. Education must aim too at helping to create a new twentieth century folk culture for the masses, within which a life of satisfaction and fulfilment can be realised. It is this absence of a folk culture which is responsible for the powerful influence of the mass media—an influence that has to be counteracted. For the able, he suggests a wider use of literature as teaching material, particularly as it can be a valuable source of moral guidance, necessary because of the rapid growth of the new rational morality which is replacing authoritative Christian morality. The sciences, contributing little to the quality of personal life should be stressed far less than they are at present.

The issues Mr. Bantock raises are vitally important, and the book is worth reading because of the clear light in which it presents them. However, the solutions offered might be considered by some to be unrealistic. With social status and financial position depending so much upon specialised technical skill of one sort or another, all but the hopeless will demand an education leading to such proficiency. The need for someone to write about a fresh approach to method rather than of a change in content seems greater after reading this book, for at least this approach contains the possibility of a realistic compromise.

M.J.A.