

## Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Emberley, Peter C., & Newell, Waller R. *Bankrupt Education: The Decline of Liberal Education in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994, Pages: 189. Price: \$17.95, paper, \$40.00, cloth.

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This book consists of three distinct and largely non-integrated components: (a) criticism of recent developments in curriculum, mainly in secondary schools in Ontario; (b) an examination of the meaning of liberal education through a discussion of the ideas of great thinkers, particularly Plato, Hegel, and Nietzsche; and (c) commentary on major figures and forces in the founding and development of Canadian Education. I found component (b) to be the most engaging, although component (c) is also informative and authoritative, if perhaps containing more detail than most readers would want. We learn, for example in this component, the names of those who trained and were subsequently trained by those educators who brought Hegelian Rational Idealism to Canadian Education.

In contrast with the scholarly reflective tenor of the other two components, the critique of contemporary education is somewhat extemporaneous and petulant, and relies heavily upon newspaper clippings. What it lacks in erudition it more than makes up for in acerbic wit and pointed understatement. Here are a few examples:

Instead of providing the foundations of intellectual and spiritual life, the new educational reforms are creating adaptable problem-solvers and socially integrated team-players fearful of giving offense. (p. 4)

In the world of common sense as opposed to the world of educational theorists, we know that self esteem comes from understanding how to make argument based on reason and experience, rather than just reacting emotionally to whatever whim predominates. (p. 51)

After noting a survey report that four out of five Canadians believe that universities are doing a good or very good job, the authors comment that “[t]his is a rating that could only be dreamed of by the politicians who affect to be serving the will of the people by calling the universities to account” (p. 53).

Although the authors do not mention Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* (1987), their approach has much in common with his. For both books, the strength of liberal education lies very much in “liberating” one from the “unthinking conventions and orthodoxies of the day, but only so that we can return to our own way of life better able to appreciate both its defects and its virtues” (Emberley & Newell, p. 11). Both books teach what liberal education is by taking the reader on a journey of the mind in which visits with Plato and Nietzsche are particularly prominent. And for the authors of both books, the chief threat to liberal education are those who view curriculum as merely an outlet for political conflicts in society at large.

Emberley and Newell are more sympathetic to issues of equity and inclusiveness than Bloom, and they welcome the incorporation into the curriculum of courses drawing upon ideas from other cultural traditions, such as the Upanishads or North American aboriginal legends. They make an important distinction between two ways of achieving greater cultural diversity in curriculum. The way they approve of is through adding new courses which reflect different experiences and perspectives. The way that they do not like is through pressure for each and every course to be revised so that it reflects every viewpoint and interest. They point out that it is not humanly possible for any teacher to attain the mastery over the entire content of such a course, the result being that such courses would lack rigor, integrity, and authenticity.

In their defense of traditional liberal education, they start with the suggestion that we “open ourselves to the possibility that there are minds that can rise above their times and speak across the centuries in the ongoing effort to understand the human condition” (p. 75). While they acknowledge that their greatest familiarity is with works which are in the Western tradition, they do not claim that this is superior to other traditions. Indeed, they note that a major element in the works of many great Western thinkers has been strong criticism of the institutions and mores of their own societies and fundamental disagreement with other Western thinkers. They argue also that a syllabus which includes such diverse writers as Plato, Marx, Mill, and Nietzsche can hardly be said to be exposing students to only a single point of view.

I have quoted so extensively from this book because - whether or not one agrees with their positions - the authors have such a marvelous way with words. Except for some parts of component (c), their writing is eloquent, fresh, and

lively. The chief weakness of the book - besides the lack of integration to which I have already referred - is the lack of evidence to support most of the observations about the state of education in Canada.

Most of the factual material on curriculum pertains to recently initiated reforms of the secondary school curriculum in Ontario. I could not find a single reference to any study of the state of liberal education in Canadian universities, not even to *Who's Afraid of Liberal Education?* (Andrew & Esbensen, 1989), which was derived from a national conference designed to assess the state of liberal education in Canada.

Although many of the authors' observations have more relevance to the university than to the school sector, the discussion of the state of education in Canadian universities is confined to about twenty pages. This section addresses many issues besides curriculum, attacking the Smith Commission Report, which it dismisses as a collection of bad ideas from both the Right and Left ends of political spectrum, and various government intrusions on university autonomy, including the recent Ontario guidelines for making governing boards more representative.

Central to the authors' diagnosis of the condition of the universities is their allegation that cash-strapped governments are "endangering one of the best and fairest university systems in the world by using it to pursue non-educational goals that the government cannot find money for elsewhere" (p. 58). While this statement probably has some validity when applied to secondary school systems, it seems rather careless when applied to the university sector. The principal non-educational goal with which the book is concerned is that of a more culturally diverse curriculum. The prime movers toward this goal have been within the academic community rather than governments, and it is not clear that in the pursuit of this goal significant money has been diverted from other goals.

If in some instances, such as the one quoted immediately above, the rhetoric in component (a) is more catchy than careful, more forceful than factual, it nevertheless makes for stimulating reading. What makes this book worth buying, however, is the lucid, incisive way in which, in component (b), it describes the loss of, and quest for, wholeness in the modern mind, and the centrality of liberal education to that project.

## References

- Bloom, A. (1987). *The closing of the American mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster.  
 Andrew, C., & Esbensen, S. (1989). *Who's Afraid of Liberal Education?* Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.

