

Gerald Kamber*

Trivium at the Bivium

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner. *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, New York: Delacorte, 1969, xv + 219 pp.

Messers Postman and Weingartner, professors of education at Queens College, have come up with a novel pedagogical theory: subversion. Taking as their point of departure what they refer to as man's "continuing struggle against the veneration of crap" (a paraphrase of Hemingway's well-known "crap detector" statement), they call upon a number of more or less eminent social thinkers all of whom have spoken out against the long-standing sclerosis in the schools. David Riesman's "'counter-cyclical' approach to education" is evoked ("meaning that schools should stress values that are not stressed by other major institutions in the culture," explain our authors) as is Norbert Weiner's "schools must function as 'anti-entropic feedback systems' ('entropy' being the word used to denote a general and unmistakable tendency of all systems in the universe to run down)," as well as Eric Hoffer's concept of "maintenance" (to prevent such a running down), John Gardner's "ever-renewing society," Kenneth Boulding's "social self-consciousness," and others.

What Postman and Weingartner have presented here is the *sartor resartus* or the anthropologist anthropologized by his aborigines. Two common assumptions are at the base of their reasoning: (1) the Montaigne-Rousseau hypothesis that the Savage is in effect Noble (until his nature becomes soured by contact with man-made strictures); and (2) the cataclysmic dissolution of our repressively patriarchal civilization in the not-too-distant future. Thus a good deal more than half of the book is given over to documenting the inadequacies of U.S. public education via the comments of a small army of dissenting educationists — those already mentioned in ad-

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dition to Alfred Korzybski, I. A. Richards, Adelbert Ames, Jr., Paul Goodman, Marshall McLuhan, Earl Kelly, and Alan Watts — who demonstrate quite convincingly how inadequate the system is and in just what way. The remainder of the book is concerned principally with “teaching strategies,” largely of a “subversive” nature, and supposedly capable of bringing about the indispensable reforms.

Among the notions discussed and stressed by Postman and Wein-gartner one finds a reiteration of McLuhan’s metaphorical dictum that “the medium is the message” (p. 17), a taking of sides in the ancient controversy between method and content (in favor of method) (p. 18), an attack on programmed instruction (p. 28), a word of encouragement for student-to-student (as opposed to student-to-teacher) interaction in the classroom (p. 34), a scathing reduction of humanism (p. 42), a reconsideration of Ames’ statement that “reality is located behind the eyes” (p. 89), a stringent denial of the meaningfulness of empirical data in regard to behavior (p. 95), the belief that the “disadvantaged” who have become enemies of the community would have been made into useful citizens had their school experience been “relevant” (p. 156), the proposal that industry cooperate with students taught in a non-academic environment (p. 159), the concept that “electric media of communication comprise new languages” (p. 160), the exhortation that educational institutions give substantive exposure to the new media in order to increase the “relevance” of education (p. 161), etc.

The crux of *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* is, however, the following sixteen points (somewhat compressed here) calculated “to lay the groundwork for a new education”:

- (1) declare a five-year moratorium on all textbooks; (2) allow English teachers to teach math and vice versa; (3) transfer elementary school teachers to high schools and vice versa; (4) require every teacher who thinks he knows his subject to write a book on it; (5) dissolve all subjects, courses, and requirements; (6) limit teachers to three declarative sentences and to fifteen interrogative ones per class; (7) prohibit teachers from asking questions to which they know the answer; (8) declare a moratorium on all tests and grades; (9) require all teachers to undergo psycho-therapy as part of in-service training; (10) classify all teachers according to ability and make the lists public; (11) require all teachers to take a test prepared by students on what they (the students) know; (12) make every class an elective and withhold

a monthly salary check if students show no interest; (13) grant a one-year leave of absence every fourth year to work in some field other than education; (14) make each teacher submit proof of a loving relationship with at least one other human being; (15) order all graffiti in toilets to be reproduced and hung on the wall in the halls; (16) declare the following words taboo: teach, syllabus, covering ground, I.Q., makeup test, disadvantaged, gifted, accelerated, enhancement, course, grade, score, human nature, dumb, college material, administrative necessity (pp. 137-140).

Certain of Postman's and Weingartner's conclusions about education in the United States today are difficult to refute since, demonstrably, a large segment of our national educational establishment is disoriented, discredited, and visibly breaking down at all levels. Their diagnosis may, therefore, be substantially correct; and undoubtedly Draconian measures are called for. But at this point, we find ourselves confronted by larger — and smaller — questions. The larger: is the Savage in fact as Noble as he is cracked up to be? and are we, in fact, on the eve of the Apocalypse? The smaller: what measures should be taken, or to put it another way: are those proposed by our authors the correct ones?

Now I am second to no man in my admiration for the pre-Lévi-Strauss primitive but *Sad Tropics* and *Structural Anthropology* have taught us that he lives at least as futile and complicated a life as we do and, furthermore, he is not one whit more disinterested or generous than we are. On the other hand, the anthropological perspective called for here can be a function, not of the average man who has in the course of recorded history been only too content to accept the *idées reçues* of his time, but rather the function of an intellectual elite — and thereby unsuitable for general consumption. In addition, while it is easy to detect vast fissures in our socio-economic system and changes will undoubtedly have to be made, Armageddon is scarcely at hand, the cultural continuum has not screeched to a total halt (*pace* Alfred North Whitehead), and after a relatively short period of accommodation, our educational system will probably return to training the largest number of technicians it can, a task it has shown itself superbly equipped to do. The premises implicit in this book then appear to me questionable or at least highly debatable.

There is, in addition, a large number of specific points with which it would be easy to cavil. For example, Postman and Weingartner deplore, rightly I think, "total homogeneity of thought among those the media reach" but fail to realize to what extent the young have been penetrated and conditioned by these very media and how much of their message they have absorbed. Nor do they seem to grasp that said media belong to and are controlled by capitalists who are, all recent remarks of Vice-President Agnew to the contrary, solidly establishmentarian, right-thinking gentlemen, moved by a powerful cupidity and sustained by a highly-developed sense of social exclusivity. Here are just some of the reasons for which the great communications networks will not, or only very reluctantly, take into the fold young people having had no more education than that afforded by the "reality curriculum" recommended by our authors. That such young people would not be prepared, psychologically and academically, for conventional subjects in a conventional curriculum (and thus be trainable only with the greatest difficulty) goes without saying.

Postman and Weingartner call for the subversion of an "anti-bureaucratic bureaucracy," but our youth doesn't want it and for good practical reasons (the very ones detailed immediately above, in fact). For somewhat the same reasons, students want and demand regular tests and exams, as any teacher can tell you. After all, the vast majority of students have been formed by a society which doesn't think the way Postman and Weingartner do, so that the straggle of Hippies, Yippies, and Bippies pales into insignificance beside the legions of relatively well-adjusted middle-class kids plugging away at a diploma and eventually a career (even though they might be a little promiscuous sexually, smoke a little pot, and wear their hair a little long). As for the disadvantaged minorities, if some of their members become enemies of the Republic it is emphatically *not* because of faulty education but because their ethos is different from that of the majority and they have not as yet been able to effect a resolution.

At a slightly more technical level, and as any good teacher can tell you, content and method are inextricably intertwined but if you have to choose, choose content, because a man who really knows his subject thoroughly will usually find some way to impart it even if it is only by inspiring in the student the will to emulate. And programmed learning (when it doesn't depend on a means of re-

sponse more complicated and exacting than the material it is presenting) has proven itself one of the sure-fire ways of getting information across. Which brings us to an even more basic point: Postman and Weingartner speak of "closed and open systems of knowables," opting of course for the open; but empirical knowledge should after all be possible and nowhere is it so much in evidence as in the teaching of mathematics, science, and language where either you're right or you're wrong. There is, too, much talk in the book about language. The Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, "that language structures our perception of reality," is brought up again and again and finally equated to the McLuhan-Carpenter theory that "the new electric media of communication comprise new languages." This is no more than an extended metaphor: we haven't as yet begun to talk "electronics," and media are emphatically not languages in any cogent linguistic sense.

Postman and Weingartner leave this reader with a rankling dissatisfaction. One never enjoys the exhilaration, as with Edgar Z. Friedenberg or Paul Goodman, of a series of brilliant insights or a chain of beautiful syntheses, however, one may disagree. The style is pedestrian and often quite awkward and their taste can be appalling. At the very beginning, for example, they state that "the survival of society is threatened" and that "something can be done," and add: "you have just finished reading this book if you do not know which is indispensable and which questionable" (p. xi). And a few pages further on: "this book was written by serious professional educators which means that we are simple romantic men who risk contributing to the mental health problem" (p. xiii). They also speak of "basic fundamentals" as a "revealing metaphor" since "fundamental" comes from "fundament" which "also means the buttocks, and specifically the anus" (p. 66). I submit that cheap, banal, self-deprecatory humor of this sort is out of place in a work of serious purpose. In the peculiar form it takes here, it is all too indicative of the shoddiness of Postman's and Weingartner's thinking and underlines the fatuousness and frivolousness of their simplistic solutions.

