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## Education after Thesixties: <sup>1</sup> Where We Are and How We Got There

By Gerald Peter Flynn  
The Center for Teaching and Learning

"When you say its about Government, do you mean it  
doesn't make any sense?"

Cartoon in a popular textbook of the early 1960's

"...and the waitress was practicing politics..."

Line in a popular song of the early 1970's

For me, thesixties began in October 1956 when General Eisenhower didn't send the Army to the aid of the "Hungarian Freedom Fighters" and ended in September 1976 when a Baptist candidate for President confessed to having had "impure thoughts" in (but not because of) the pages of Playboy. What happened during this twenty year decade is that we in America became the first "Modernized" nation in history and thus experienced the emergence of "politics" as an integral, if not the integral, feature of our lives. My purpose in this brief essay is to explore the implications of the foregoing for education in the United States as we begin our third century of communal existence.

First, then, let me document my assertion about the increasingly political character of life in schools during thesixties. I have chosen a modified stream-of-consciousness technique with which to convey this view because of my desire to communicate a gestalt rather than develop an argument. The reader is encouraged to approach the following presentation with this caveat in mind. In other words, try to seek the sense-of-the-whole rather than the meaning-of-the-particulars of which it is constituted. Here, then, is thesixties in a configurational rather than a linear mold:

For the first time massive Federal legislation dealt with local schools, beginning with the National

Defense Education Act of 1958...Teachers became militant seeking collective bargaining arrangements, arguing among themselves over unionization, and going out on strike...There was a movement for Student Power and increasingly formal recognition of Student Rights...With a speed that some found too "deliberate" and others found too accelerated, schools began to desegregate; the troops (which hadn't gone to Budapest) were sent to Little Rock and buses went out from Roxbury...The autonomy of local schools became "Community Control" and from part of our priceless American heritage became a controversial threat to standards of "professional excellence"...Creative innovations which engendered heated disputes, in school and out, appeared (and disappeared) with disarming rapidity: the new math, P.P.B.S., Man A Course of Study, differentiated staffing, modular scheduling, team teaching, contract systems, and, of course, everybody's favorite-- Family Life Education...A burgeoning concern for what an earlier age unashamedly called "character training" appearing under the prestigious rubrics of "values clarification" and "moral development"... Educators went from a concern with juvenile delinquency and the "drop-out problem" to a concern with rampant vandalism and felonious assaults in school buildings...New styles of participatory administration were introduced all of which invited debate and some of which may have intensified it beyond the bounds of civility...Intergroup differences became a legitimate topic of conversation while belief in intergroup superiority/inferiority stopped being one. Thus, we began to talk about race, religion, nationality, sex, and social class without having the right words to explain what they meant. The American Dream gave birth to Compensatory Programs which in turn ran into Cultural pluralism...The Wall of Separation between Church and State became a battle-ground with skirmishes over prayer or no-prayer, vouchers, released-time, and textbook purchasing...New hardware came clattering into the building under the guise of language labs and P.L.A.T.O....Contending conceptions of professionalism were espoused: merit pay, tenure systems,

advocacy roles, and ambivalence toward expertise... And then there was Humanistic Education, and Aesthetic Education, and Confluent Education, and Open Education, and Competency-Based Education, and Criteria-Referenced Learning, and Behavior Modification...Tax-payers refused to approve bond issues even in enlightened suburban communities...The "hidden curriculum" came out of the closet and the I.Q. Test went in...Not only Cadets but also graduate students were found to be cheating on their tests... Affirmative Action brought the hallowed "all men are created equal" to the point of being attacked for its sexist language...Accountability stalked the land...The War in Viet Nam divided student bodies and faculties among themselves and educational institutions from the outside world...Finally, there grew increasing discussion of changing relationships between the American Public School Myth and the Myth of Social Mobility such that the economic advantages of getting your diploma or your degree was questioned, while the indisputable diminution of a Teaching Certificate or a Ph.D.'s cash value became manifest...etc. etc.

Now, whether or not you tend to define "politics" with reference to Government--so that wherever the Government is, there also is politics; or with reference to Power/Influence--so that wherever they are, it is; or with reference to their common phenomenon/experience of human conflict and its resolution; it seems beyond cavil that there was an explosion of politics in thesixties. My next point will be to suggest why I think that that politicization of education in America which I have just described will be a permanent feature of life in school. Thus, I turn to my second contention, viz., that during thesixties the U.S. became the first "Modernized Society" in history.

According to my best estimate, sometime between 1965, when Harvey Cox of the Harvard Divinity School published The Secular City--a Liberal paen to "Modern" liberty--and 1970, when Edward C. Banfield of the Harvard Government Department published The Unheavenly City--a Conservative apologia for "Modern" inequality--the process of "Modernization" which, depending upon your interests began in Wittenburg, London, Paris or

Philadelphia, came to an end in the United States. Thus, we became: "Bureaucratized," and so unable to locate institutional authority and responsibility; "Democratized," and so obligated to live with the contradiction between a mindless commitment to both liberty and equality; "Industrialized," and so paced by the rhythms of nineteenth century railroads and twentieth century factories; "Scientizied," and so contemptuous of concrete personal experience as a legitimate source of public knowledge; "Secularized," and so actually believing that we possessed the power to control life absolutely; and "Urbanized," and so intimately and inextricably enmeshed in each other's lives. To this latter point, however, we are not yet fully accommodated, at least not here in North Dakota, as I am reminded each time I read another local editorial eulogizing the comparative bliss of rural--that is to say, non-urban--living followed by a perusal of the seasonal ads for farm machinery, the cost of which exceeds the inflated value of my modest tract house.

To have become Modernized is to have run out of space; both geographic and social. In a word, the interstices are filled-in; the slack is gone. The New Frontier just didn't take as long as the Old Frontier to close. Propinquity and publicity are the defining characteristics of our world now for there are simply no more secrets; to be learned or kept. Along with this, that Hero of Modernity--the Individual--is gone for good, although his public relations team is still cranking-out copy. He is gone because of the fact that of all the things that a "Modern Society" preeminently is, it is a "system," and, a "system" is, above all else, an interdependent whole. In such a setting, the independent individual as a cultural ideal is anachronous at best, and terminally destructive at worst. As I see it the noise of thesixties was the societal crunch of the increasingly undeniable contradiction between the implications of a "Liberal" Individualistic ideology and the "Conservative" implications of a Systemic social reality. The uncomfortable silence of the seventies--in school and out--is simply a recognition, largely pre-conscious at this point, of this fundamental impasse. We just don't know--or, as I would put it, don't want

to know--where we're at. Paraphrasing Pogo, we have finally gotten to where we were going, only to discover that it isn't there. For "Modernity" is a process, a movement-toward or away-from; an aspiration to become or to cease having been. There just is no such thing as being Modern. As a stopping-point it ceases to have any meaning, for at heart "Modernization"--and so America--derives its substance from opposition to the past. Thus, when the last vestige of the past (of "Tradition") is eroded--and my point is that this has happened, at least in our public discourse or civil conversation--there is nothing remaining for "Modernity" to liberate us from. If anything, we need to be liberated from "Liberation."

It will be recalled that during thesixties we were always having a different "crisis." As Arthur Schlesinger Jr. put it in the July 1970 issue of News-week: "The crises we are living through are the crises of modernity." There was the crisis of the schools--when Johnnie couldn't read or count as well as Sergei; the racial crisis--when Black and White would not lie down together as the proverbial lion and lamb; the crisis of our cities--when "the Big Apple" and all its myriad seedlings began to go sour; the ecological crisis--when we couldn't decide whether redwood trees or lumberjacks were more valuable; the crisis of public morality--when we couldn't decide whether it was worse to cheat on your wife or on your constituents; and, lastly, the crisis of the ultimate meaning of life--when we must decide whether the Constitution of the United States should be for women or against children. It may also be recalled that throughout those pyrotechnic days, we were never at a loss for some learned sage to reassure us that the Chinese ideogram for "crisis" meant "opportunity." Less conspicuously, an occasional observer would sometimes note that a crisis was also a situation "... when sudden changes in life conditions disrupt established social relations...(and)...people are not certain of what to expect of one another." In the words of one of our most influential popular sociologists, we had become A Nation of Strangers. Unfortunately, we are deprived of any of the older options whereby we had dealt with our fundamental pluralism: we

couldn't move, we could not dominate and we wouldn't submit, and we could not ignore each other. The tumult of thesixties was the roar of our collective confusion as we learned that not only were the old answers wrong, but the old questions weren't even right.

That the school system should have experienced the "crises of Modernity" with especial vehemence is not surprising when the central place of formal education--as the principal agency of socialization and status allocation--is recalled.<sup>2</sup> In fact, one of the most useful ways for understanding a Modernizing Society is to see it as a great big classroom where "Traditional Orientations" are transmuted into "Modern Attitudes" and where those who resist the change--for whatever reasons--are "cooled-out" or "locked-up."

Let me recapitulate. If I am correct in the foregoing description and interpretation, then the escalation of politics which engulfed American society in general, and American educational institutions in particular, during thesixties was due to what amounts to a sea-change in our world. Furthermore, what now remains to be effected is a commensurate alteration in our view of the world so that our experience and our words for ordering that experience come into greater congruence. Specifically, I want to suggest that we must come to understand that the conjunction of school and politics is here to stay. Moreover, if we don't alter our understanding of what politics means, it is my opinion that schooling in America--not to mention the America in which and for which that schooling exists--does not have a very optimistic prospect. But first, I want to explore what seem to be the main definitions of politics which American educators are likely to hold.

It seems to me--as I suggested above--that when people use the word "politics" they are referring either to something connectable to Government, or to something related to Power/Influence. The distinctive feature of Government is its "monopoly over the legitimate use of force."<sup>3</sup> In other words, if you don't do what the Government says, you can go to jail or even lose your life. On the other hand, the distinctive feature of Power (think of influence as soft power)

is the capacity "...of men to realize their own will... even against the resistance of others..."<sup>4</sup> Thus, the element of coercion is, I would submit, common to our popular understanding of politics; the ability to impose one's will on others. Put another way, the essence is controlling the environment. Thus, I would say that one inescapable conclusion of this conception of politics is a belief that given a sufficiency of coercion, anything one wills or wants is possible. If I am correct, here, then there is a considerable potential within this definition of politics for encouraging grandiosity of expectations. The Faustian belief that anything is possible seems to me to lie at the heart of our understanding of Government and of power. Now, there is a second aspect to our popular conception of politics which can be suggested by focusing on power, viz., that anything is permitted. Power knows no higher standard than success. Power is realistic; calculating; hard-nosed. Which is, of course, also what we think of our most successful politicians. The best and the brightest do not win without also being the coolest and the shrewdest.

What I am saying is that the understanding of politics, which American Educators will--and do--employ when we acknowledge that politics has come to school, carries with it the implication that we can do anything we set our wills to if we have enough power. Need I add that money is power and that Government means money just to close the circle? Furthermore, once we see ourselves as operating in the realm of power--and whenever we admit that we are in politics that is what we are likely to believe--we feel justified in doing anything that contributes to the attainment of our aims. Unfortunately, the education of free and self-respecting persons is simply unthinkable in such a context. People cannot be forced to learn. Without a climate of trust--and the manipulative connotations of politics defined as power/influence destroy the basis for trust, viz., the grounds for believing one another--the idea of a community of learners is absurd.

If, in fact, politics and education are permanently joined because the separation of the political and the non-political realms--of "the public and the



private sectors"--which was central to the process of Modernization, can no longer be maintained once there remains no more residual Traditionalism--the source of the non-political--what are we to do? Let me suggest that a deeper appreciation of what it means to be political--deeper than either coercing or conning one another--offers some hope. For the essence of politics is neither force nor duplicity, it is choice and creativity. Politics is whatever can be talked about for whatever can be said can be said differently.<sup>5</sup> To recognize that something is political is to see that it had a beginning, that it was not always so. This is implied in the experience of Governments which after all enact laws. To feel yourself the object of power/influence illuminates the same experience, you do not have to comply. Thus, to be aware of the political character of education--and by extension, of the political character of life itself--is to see that what is, does not have to be so. It could be otherwise. The shadow of the mushroom cloud has been replaced by the testube--but the fact is identical. Life does not have to be. Conflict--the primary datum of politics whether as experience or as phenomena--attests to just this competition between alternative ways of being. When you are in conflict, you know that you are not in the realm of absoluteness. One does not conflict with Ultimate Reality. Dispute is testimony to humanity. Concord is Divine. Thus, to acknowledge that conflict is hereafter a central reality in American Education--and this is what we are really saying when we allow that politics and schooling are inextricably meshed--is really but another way of recognizing that Education is a human rather than a Divine institution. In a word, politicizing the schools is the opportunity to humanize education. And who in the United States today could be opposed to a more humanistic education?

NOTES

1. Throughout the essay I use the compact form, the-sixties, in order to convey the evocative rather than strictly denotative meaning of the term. It refers to happenings beyond the chronological bounds 1 Jan. 60 to 31 Dec. 69 and as employed in current usage enjoys the status of an intellectual folk symbol comparable to thegreatdepression and thepuritanmind.
2. See both Martin Charnoy, Education as Cultural Imperialism (1974) and Talcott Parsons, "The School Class as a Social System: Some of Its Functions in American Society," Harvard Educational Review, (Fall, 1959).
3. Max Weber, "Politics As a Vocation."
4. Max Weber, "Class, Status, and Power."
5. Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition: A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man (1958) and On Revolution (1963).