Book Reviews

Trevor Colbourn, Editor

Jerome Bruner, *The Culture of Education.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 185 pp. $24.95.

The English experience of the study of education has not been good. We have had professors who were either busy counting things on the ground floor or worrying about philosophy on floor 101. They have written extensively, but rarely well, and the few who have attempted any kind of synthesis have been cult figures for a period, before being cut down or forgotten.

In America it is often different, and in the course of this century we have had a number of great writers who know children as well as books and whose wisdom has really made a difference all over the world. Among them Jerome Bruner's name stands high, and in this book a clutch of new thinking is offered for our consideration. It is well worth the reading, for I sense that here Bruner is pulling at his anchors a little—not completely changing his mind on anything, but starting off in some new directions that alter the balance of his thought and presentation.

He was once very sure of himself and tended to justify himself through his own work and his critiques of others. Here the endless footnotes indicate a monstrous amount of reading sometimes validates his thinking, at other times worries him. He has been teaching in other fields—law and medicine, particularly—and this has left its mark. He notes constantly how law has to proceed via narrative in practice, and when the narrative is false, disaster ensues. But there are no new answers, no really hard theories, just new directions (as stated in the opening chapter on culture, for example) and a growing realization that nothing in education is quite so simple as we once thought.

Not that he has become, like so many, a ditherer. He remains a clear thinking, sharp minded, and simple, clear, and pleasurable communicator. He knows absolutely what he is talking about: the essence of education being

> the powers of consciousness, reflection, breadth of dialogue and negotiation. At its best it is participatory, proactive, com-

> munal, collaborative and above all...it is given over to constructing meanings, rather than receiving them.

This makes us cheer in England, oppressed by those in power who would wish to reverse these sentiments absolutely and would like to return to some imagined golden age when bright-eyed, well-behaved children sat in rows sucking up the honeyed speech of their instructor out front. Indeed our experience is much the same as in the States, and Bruner sees and bleeds for the errors of the state intervention in education where politicians seek to impose assessment to find out what has gone wrong rather than looking for ways to encourage people to find ways to do better.

> We need a surer sense of what to teach to whom and how to go about teaching it in such a way that it will make those taught more effective, less alienated and better human beings.

If I could sew, I would put that on my banner!

Bruner's great discovery (and of course he is not alone in this) is the prime role that narrative plays in learning and could play in our teaching. He sees story as both our culture talking to us and us accommodating to our culture by constructing our own narratives towards understandings. This is the heart of the matter—if civilization is breaking down it is because we can no longer hear our culture talking, and we have no means of storing a role in it for ourselves. So our only alternative is to destroy it, to savage it, because it isn't ours, and because it belongs to someone else, this is a cause of war.

Bruner has many wise words to say about narrative, but regrettably he is still talking in an analytical format (like the convert with a creed) rather than illuminating with practice and example. The whole book lights up when he tells the story of Niels Bohr struggling towards his theory of complementarity. He tells how his little son had stolen a toy from a shop and later had confessed this to his father, and

> I was struck by the fact that I could not think of my son at the same moment both in the light of love and in the light of justice.

And at once he knew that you cannot know both the position and speed of a particle at any one time. Above all he knew that this radical new notion was comprehensible and natural, not strange or weird, and the story had told him that. Tell us more stories, Mr. Bruner, please.

This is a wise book—like a teacher I tick the margin where I agree, and this is a sea of ticks. I shall reread and think through again the great thoughts so finely put here, and I recommend you to read it, too.

—— John Fines

Richard Hofstadter, with a new introduction by Roger L. Geiger, *Academic Freedom in the Age of the College*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 284 pp. $22.95.

The president of a southern college, in the East to raise funds, was falsely rumored to have given a speech praising a radical political figure. Townspeople around the college were so incensed as to force the closure of the college and the flight of its faculty. The college did not reopen for four years.

It was, as the reader might have guessed, the '50s. Not this century's McCarthyist era of political and intellectual suppression, however, but the 1850s. The college was Berea in Kentucky, the radical was John Brown, and the president, who would serve nearly four more decades in that role when Berea reopened in 1863, was the Reverend John Gregg Fee.

Richard Hofstadter's *Academic Freedom in the Age of the College* notes that event among many others as it traces the roots of American academic freedom from Europe's Middle Ages to the looming specter of the Civil War. Commissioned in response to McCarthyism, the book was first published in 1955 as part of a single volume, *Academic Freedom in Our Time*, with Walter P. Metzger writing on topics after 1865 and Robert MacIver addressing then-contemporary issues. Reprinted as a stand-alone volume in 1961, Hofstadter's work has been republished in the Foundations of Higher Education series from Rutger's Transaction Publishers.

Hofstadter's framework is largely that of the academy within the broader social context of religious freedom. "Academic freedom and religious free-

dom have one root in common," he wrote. "[B]oth are based upon the freedom of conscience, hence neither can flourish in a community that has no respect for human individualism" (p. 62). Hofstadter meticulously traces the fitful development—and suppression—of formal academic freedom through Catholic inquisitions and heresy trials, Protestant-Catholic confrontation, and vicious Protestant schisms and sectarianism. The consequences of perceived unorthodoxy could be horrific, both institutionally and personally. Another '50s' incident, in this case 1355, on St. Scholastica's Day at Oxford, townsmen staged an assault on scholars in which they were beaten, tortured, and killed. The university suspended operations for several months, until the bishop and king interceded and put the town itself under university control. Municipal officers were compelled at annual mass to offer a penny apiece for the murder victims, a practice that continued until 1825. Talk about your town-gown tensions!

Such academic freedom as was enjoyed during the pre-American centuries owed much, of course, to the perserverance and courage of individuals working on the frontiers of science, political philosophy, and other fields. But the circumstances that allowed it occaisionally to endure were less often attributable to societal progressiveness than to the mobility of early faculties and "institutions," the lack of awareness by local populations, and the distance and distraction of church and lay officialdom.

The establishment of higher education in America was marked more by an adaptation of, rather than a break from, this irregular precedent. The question of academic freedom was subsumed still under questions of religious freedom. Although the Enlightenment and occasional, scattered, individual enlightenment allowed for some genuine tolerance of difference of opinion, much such freedom derived from principles of expediency; single sects were often not present in such large populations as to make doctrinal tests practical from the standpoint of enrollment, for example. Students might be permitted broad debate latitude to prepare them for devilish confrontations, and the typical president, upon whom much doctrinal focus was concentrated, was often adept as deflecting sectarian criticism from boards of trustees if his fundraising skills, for example, were well honed. But faculty, or more strictly tutors, were few in number at the many small colleges and were employed to execute, not design, curricula.

Even progressive founders of American higher education evidenced irregular support and flawed prescriptions for academic freedom as we now appreciate it. William Livingston, a New York lawyer and Presbyterian arguing for the establishment in the 18th century of King's College, advocated reducing the influence of Anglican trustees and churchmen by turning over virtually all matters of institutional governance and rulemaking to the state legislature; that proposal must surely send chills down many contemporary spines. Jefferson's ideal of faculty governance and academic freedom at the University of Virginia was compromised by his insistence upon anti-Federalist orthodoxy in governmental instruction.

By the eve of the Civil War, some formal articulations of academic freedom were put forth, and Hofstadter suggests that particularly tolerant institutions, such as the College of South Carolina, flourished in enrollment and reputation as a result. But the questions of the Civil War were no friend to civilized discourse and inquiry. Active political debate might have existed among institutions but rarely within them. Abolitionist orthodoxy was as predominately mandatory among Northern faculties as sympathy for slavery was in Southern colleges. We were far from the day in 1873 when president Paul Ansell Chadbourne, in his inaugural speech at Williams College, could affirm, if indirectly, the importance of academic freedom by saying, "Professors are sometimes spoken of as working for the college. They are the college" (p. 274).

Roger L. Geiger of Pennsylvania State University's Higher Education program adds much to our appreciation of the book—and of the author—in his new introduction. Geiger notes that Hofstadter's contributions to higher education history and thought were substantial and varied, but generally underappreciated because of his prominence on broader themes of history and politics. Even nearly three decades after Hofstadter's untimely death in 1970, seven of his books are still in print.

Hofstadter lived to see the student uprisings and fundamental criticisms of higher education that wracked the 1960s. His affections for the academy, despite its limitations, were encapsulated in his 1968 commencement address at Columbia University. The university is:

> ...suspended between its position in the external world, with

> all its corruptions and evils and cruelties, and the splendid world of our imagination...[W]ith all its limitations and failures...it is the best and most benign side of our society insofar as that society aims to cherish the human mind (p. xi).

A fine argument, indeed, for the imperative of academic freedom.

—— Marc Cutright