

## Liberal Education: Elitist and Irrelevant to Everyday Life?

Harold Entwistle

Volume 27, numéro 2, 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074052ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074052ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Entwistle, H. (2020). Liberal Education: Elitist and Irrelevant to Everyday Life? *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 27(2). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074052ar>

Copyright © Harold Entwistle, 2020

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**Érudit**

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

# Liberal Education: Elitist and Irrelevant to Everyday Life?

Harold Entwistle, Concordia University

## *Introduction*

Liberal education is not universally accepted as the proper educational experience for the majority of students in schools. Its critics raise a variety of objections: that liberal education is elitist; that it is irrelevant to the everyday lives of ordinary people; that it is almost exclusively cognitive in orientation, neglecting the emotions and the practical life; that in multicultural societies it is culturally myopic, focusing entirely on the achievements of Western civilisation to the neglect of other contributions to human knowledge; and, from some feminists, that it is an authoritarian imposition of a patriarchal society which deliberately diminishes the contributions which women have made to Western culture. I believe all of these objections to be misconceived, but in this paper one cannot attempt a refutation of all of them. Accordingly I shall concentrate on the related objections that liberal education is elitist and that it fails to meet the needs of ordinary people in the daily conduct of their lives.

One other introductory point: recently, there has been some recourse to the term "liberal education" in a sense quite different from its traditional usage in the history of education. Some have taken the adjective "liberal" to refer to the kind of pedagogy built upon the free choices and initiatives of individual learners, such that liberal education becomes indistinguishable from progressive education. However, this is not the historical sense of the term and defence of this more recent usage is not the subject of this paper.

Briefly, liberal education is the attempt to make the whole of human knowledge available to the learner, though in schools this encyclopedism requires selection and different depth and width of coverage according to individual interests and capacities. Familiarly, not least in the interests of manageability, the "encyclopedia" of human knowledge has been structured into school subjects: history, literature, language, philosophy, religion, the natural and social sciences, ethics, mathematics and the arts. To adapt Leavis's terminology, applied by him only to literature, the curriculum of liberal education has embraced the "great traditions" of thought about the human condition and the natural and social environments. But, contrary to the assumption of many critics (as, for example, in Freire's dismissal of traditional schooling as educational "banking") liberal education cannot be reduced to the offering, ingestion and regurgitation of mere items of information. The various categorisations of the liberal curriculum as "forms of knowledge," "realms of meaning," "disciplines" or "voices" are a reminder that the assimilation of knowledge must be structured, significant, critical, concerned with understanding and, even, as in Oakeshott's formulation, the outcome of a conversation.<sup>1</sup>

## *Liberal Education as Elitist*

The word "elite" denotes a group of people who stand apart from their fellows with respect to some human accomplishment or some ascribed status.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, excellent actors, chess, soccer or baseball players, academics or politicians and managerial executives, as well as the practitioners of arts and crafts, constitute different elites, being endowed, respectively, with histrionic or athletic skills, intellectual abilities, political acumen, entrepreneurial flair, aesthetic sensibility, or manual dexterity. Members of other elites, the wealthy or the socially privileged, may or may not owe their elite status to personal human qualities. They may, indeed, be rich and famous as a result of their own efforts. On the other hand, they may merely be members of social, political or economic dynasties owing their status to nothing more than having been born or married into particular families. Attitudes towards elites of one kind or another depend partly upon this distinction between elite status which comes from outstanding personal qualities and that which is merely inherited.

Our behaviour, if not our rhetoric, suggests an ambivalence towards elites. We may disdain the social elites whose members owe their eminence largely to accidents of birth, inheritance, or a privileged education. But we pay substantially to applaud first-class baseball or soccer players, gifted entertainers, writers, and artists of various kinds; and despite our scorn for politicians in general, we often admire the skill, intelligence and, sometimes, the courage of gifted political leaders. In short, we recognise and admire the achievements of other people whose gifts exceed our own. As with some sporting figures and popular entertainers, we may think that their outstanding qualities attract disproportionate monetary rewards, but that their performances outshine our own modest achievements we neither doubt nor resent. Given our different individual value systems, we judge the achievements of different performance elites differently but that there are elites in many fields of human endeavour we do not question.

However, "elitist" is an adjective which is almost always used pejoratively to denote those values, activities, and institutions which justify, promote, and legitimate an elite, especially those educational arrangements which appear designed to set selected individuals apart from the population at large in order to recruit and train them for social, professional, or political eminence. It should be noted that this process of educational selection and promotion applies mainly to those belonging to the upper social classes, or to those from other social classes who display a high degree of measured intelligence and, hence, seem appropriate candidates for higher education and recruitment to the learned professions. It is this kind of educational provision which is usually dismissed as elitist. Future members of skilled elites (such as in sports and the arts) rise to the top through the sheer evidence of their particular talent and, so far as their competencies need to be trained at all, they are usually nurtured in the lower echelons of the elite organisations themselves (such as farm teams, reserve teams, and youth theatres) or in specialised schools (such as schools of art) which are not normally dismissed as elitist.

Hence, to claim that liberal education is elitist is to say that it is only good for the selection and training of those who are destined to be members of the managerial or social elites and of no use to ordinary people. That is, the disciplines or forms of knowledge which usually comprise the curriculum of liberal education have only this instrumental, elitist purpose and have no universal educational value. To what extent can this dismissal of liberal education as elitist be sustained?

Historically, the provision of liberal education, tied as it was to the fact of free citizenship, was elitist in this sense. From its inception in Ancient Greece and down through the centuries of political oligarchy, liberal education was reserved for a relatively privileged few. Free citizens were relatively few in number; the majority were slaves, or serfs, or unenfranchised industrial workers. But with the intellectual, political, technological and economic ferments associated with the eighteenth century, popular education increasingly became a reality. Restricted, initially, to little more than the Three Rs, this has progressively taken on the characteristics of liberal education. The orientation of elementary or primary education has been the intellectual skills of literacy and numeracy and, beyond that, an introduction to subjects like history, literature, geography and science taught at what Piagetians would call a concrete-operational level. Liberal secondary education, focused upon the liberal disciplines in a much more specialised way, was first extended to the middle classes, then to "clever" working class children, and finally, by the third quarter of this century, made available to all children in advanced industrial societies, in accord with the equalitarianism of the prevailing social philosophy. This last development represents the attempt to universalise liberal education.

However, even as this educational reform came to fruition, it began to be called into question from both ends of the political and educational spectrums. Conservatives stress the inevitability of elites (particularly managerial and cultural elites) and the importance of identifying and nurturing these in educational institutions segregated from the mass of the school population. Hence, though not themselves employing the term "elitist" (since that is usually a term of abuse), political conservatives and some educational conservatives<sup>3</sup> are apt to think the universalisation of liberal education a mistake. In their view, liberal education is not for everyone but only for those children whose social background is propitious for an education rooted in language and "literature"<sup>4</sup> and (though not all conservatives are agreed upon this) those with high measured intelligence. Educational conservatives are apt to believe that the universalisation of liberal education involves the dilution or corruption of culture.<sup>5</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly (though for different reasons), a similar view of the unsuitability of liberal education for the great mass of children is taken by some on the political and educational Left. These see the universalisation of liberal education as mistaken since, on their view, liberal culture is appropriate only to a particular social class (a social elite to be destroyed by revolutionary social change) and is destructive of valid, vigorous, popular culture. Thus, liberal education is, indeed, functional only for the capitalist ruling class and its agents. On this view, there is nothing culturally or epistemologically superior about the historical liberal disciplines which have formed the content of the liberal curriculum. Such forms of knowledge are dismissed as "ideological" representing a particular view of the universe which serves only the interests of the ruling class. It is also variously categorised as "high-status knowledge," "high culture," or "middle-class knowledge," supportive of a particular life style which is not that of the ordinary people in their everyday lives.<sup>6</sup>

This radical objection to making a liberal education available to every child reveals two quite different meanings which have become attached to the epithet "elitist." The first of these which we have already noted refers to those educational arrangements which reserve the best education for a limited number

of students—the able or the wealthy. In this sense, liberal education is dismissed as elitist because it is thought appropriate only to the needs and life-style of a privileged few. But, oddly, those supposedly democratic reforms of education aiming at the universal provision of liberal education to all children are also dismissed by some radicals as elitist. Here, the epithet refers not to the select group of students towards which liberal education is targeted, but to the alleged imposition of liberal education upon other people's children by those presuming their own culture to be superior. On this view, the elite (who attract the epithet "elitist") are not the student beneficiaries of privileged educational arrangements and their families, but a group of educationists, bureaucrats, pundits and politicians who presume to define what everybody ought to know, irrespective of the culture they already have. Both of these senses of elitism have been used in criticism of two recent American best sellers advocating, in quite different ways, the urgent need for a return to liberal education.<sup>7</sup> In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom is quite explicit about his elitist intent in the first of the senses we have just noted. His advocacy of liberal education is on behalf of "students of high intelligence, materially and spiritually free to do pretty much what they want with the few years of college they are privileged to have—in short, the kind of young persons who populate the twenty or thirty best universities" (p. 22). But, oddly, Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* is also dismissed as elitist, despite his insistence that the items of knowledge he catalogues should be the cognitive property of every American, an apparently democratic notion justified by an appeal to equality conceived in cultural terms. Such a proposal can only be dismissed as elitist in the relatively new sense of that word when applied to any attempt on the part of an educational authority (from the minister of education to the individual classroom teacher) to prescribe what students should learn. Evidently, only a thorough-going student-centredness, in which students are both architects and agents of their own education, can avoid this second kind of condemnation as elitist.

Between the extreme conservative and radical criticisms of liberal education which we have noted, some uneasiness has often existed about the universal relevance of liberal education amongst educationists, teachers, and the general public who appear to have no political or ideological axe to grind. This uneasiness has been prompted by the feeling that somehow schools have gone wrong, as evidenced by phenomena like the drop-out and apparently widespread indiscipline within schools. These disorders are sometimes blamed upon the prevalence of the liberal, discipline-based curriculum and its assumed irrelevance for a majority of children who are destined only to become bus or truck drivers, unskilled or semi-skilled factory operatives, or unskilled workers cleaning the subway or performing similar menial tasks. The solution has seemed to lie in identifying a curriculum more relevant to the future working lives of these children, though the less skilled the future occupation, the more difficult it is to envisage anything which might be relevant whilst still dignified by the name of education. However, though the practice of some occupations appears to make little if any demand whatsoever upon either practical or cognitive knowledge, when we consider the educational demands of citizenship in a democracy, we face a challenging paradox.

### *Liberal Education and Democratic Citizenship*

The distinguished American advocate of liberal education, Robert M. Hutchins, underlined this paradox of democracy many years ago when he wrote:

The foundation of democracy is universal suffrage. It makes every man a ruler. If every man is a ruler, every man needs the education that rulers ought to have. The kind of education we accept now when everybody is destined to rule is fundamentally an extension of the kind that in Jefferson's time was thought suitable to those destined to labour not to rule. When we talk of our political goals, we admit the right of every man to be a ruler. When we talk of our educational program, we see no inconsistency in saying that only a few have the capacity to get the education that rulers ought to have—either we should abandon the democratic ideal or we should help every citizen to acquire the education that is appropriate to free men. (p. 44)

One implication of this passage is that, since ancient times, liberal education has been thought to be the appropriate preparation for participation in government. Hence, if there are citizens today who have no capacity or appetite for liberal education, they ought not to be permitted the rights and privileges of citizenship. If a majority of people are incapable of learning language with a degree of subtlety, cannot appreciate sound arguments, see through those which are spurious, manipulative or empty rhetoric, criticise those which are fallacious, have no grasp of relevant information, there is no case for democracy.

But those educational reforms which have sought to universalise liberal education in the comprehensive secondary school were, ostensibly, in pursuit of the democratic imperative which Hutchins underlined—the need to make available to every free citizen in a modern democracy precisely that kind of liberal education which, in the past, has nurtured the political oligarchies which exercised hegemony over subject peoples. An older generation of political radicals took it for granted that what Gramsci called the subaltern classes (workers and peasants) could not aspire to be the new ruling class without that kind of liberal knowledge which had been the educational foundation of the hegemony of the old ruling class. They, like Hutchins and others, took it for granted that any informed, responsible, and effective political activity required nothing less than familiarity with the humanistic knowledge of the liberal curriculum.<sup>8</sup> One modern advocate of liberal education has written of its consequences for the educated person as follows: "He understands vividly, perhaps, that some created objects are beautiful and others not; he can recognise the elegance of a proof, or a paragraph, the cogency of an argument, the clarity of an exposition, the wit of a remark, the neatness of a plot and the justice and wisdom of a decision" (Peters, 1977, p. 66). Critics are apt to suggest that this list of human accomplishments takes us much closer to the senior common room than to the pub or the bar on the corner where the average person is more likely to be found. But the fact is that anything approaching effective democratic citizenship surely requires that one recognises the cogency of an argument (at least, that an argument is not specious or disingenuous) and the clarity of an exposition, as well as the justice of a decision.

However, at this point it is important to acknowledge that what I have suggested are the characteristics of democratic citizenship apply only to a particular conception of democracy, and one that is not widely held, especially by

politicians in modern democracies. Evaluating arguments, seeing through political rhetoric, and making informed judgements about domestic and international affairs are not things which elected officials expect of their constituents. They often have an alternative conception of democracy, especially evident in much American political rhetoric, which can co-exist with widespread public ignorance and, indeed, illiteracy. Variouslly categorised as "elitist," "thin," or "weak" democracy, this alternative conception derives primarily from extolling the virtues of freedom and of free elections, together with the existence of competing political parties. No doubt, freedom is a precious possession, but it is also quite compatible with political indifference, cultural philistinism, and selfish individualism. Quite simply, to say that a person is a free citizen tells one nothing at all about the quality of his or her life, sense of responsibility, level of education, and so on. As such a culturally empty notion, freedom may be a necessary condition for democracy but it is by no means a sufficient condition. Yet, this conception of democracy as a thing limited to participation in free elections requires neither education nor political responsibility. Mere participation in the electoral process of most of the world's free, democratic societies requires only the ability to make the mark of the illiterate when voting. Both Democratic and Republican presidents and congressmen, liberal, socialist, and conservative prime ministers, and members of parliament attract the votes of all kinds of voter, the illiterate and the well educated, the thoughtful and the crass, the caring and the indifferent. No political party has a monopoly of the votes of the wealthy or the gifted, on the one hand, or of the poor, exploited or illiterate, on the other. In free elections, there is no way in which education and knowledge count for more than utter ignorance. Add to this the infrequency of opportunities for voting, and it becomes clear that, although free elections are a necessary part of the democratic process,<sup>9</sup> any conception of democracy in which free elections are the be and end all of the political process has little connection with classical conceptions of free, democratic citizenship.

Historically, from Ancient Greece, down through the congregational and town democracies of the New World and the so-called workingmen's democracies of the nineteenth century, into present-day proposals for things like industrial democracy, there has persisted the notion that democratic citizenship requires a more active and continuous participation in government than is permitted by the occasional free election. Originally, representative government was not considered a political virtue, so much as an expedient to accommodate the fact that population growth made the face-to-face democracies of the ancient city state and of the American township unworkable. But there are other conceptions of political democracy which allow for maximum citizen participation in government in large modern industrial societies.<sup>10</sup> These require the concept of the well-informed citizen and, hence, a liberal education of the kind discussed earlier. But the alternative passive, quietest conception of democracy, which is satisfied with minimal participation in free elections, has no implications for education of any kind, except that education is unimportant. The suggestion one sometimes hears that liberal education is not for ditch diggers or garbage collectors and the like can only be reconciled with a minimal, non-active conception of democracy. It must necessarily exclude them from consideration as active citizens having an intelligent contribution to political life. In practice, "thin," "weak," or "elite" democracy may thrive upon the ignorance of citizens. But

in those historic documents of Western political theory from which the classic notion of democracy derives, there is tacitly, and often explicitly, the assumption that all human beings are essentially rational and educable.

No doubt, this begs the question of whether the notion of human educability for democratic citizenship entails only liberal education. Conceivably, there could be some less demanding, cognitively diluted alternative which would more effectively prepare the average person for the obligations and privileges of citizenship. But any conclusion that some alternative to liberal education is more appropriate preparation for citizenship, must show how such an alternative will support a political culture which not only serves the best interests of all citizens, but also enables them to participate in discussion and decision making about the complex international and domestic issues which are the stuff of modern politics.<sup>11</sup> There must be some correspondence between our democratic rhetoric and our educational provisions. We cannot require that in a democracy everyone must have the kind of political judgement and insight which only a liberal education can vouchsafe, whilst also concluding that most people lack the capacity, interest, discipline, or motivation to acquire the liberal education appropriate to free citizens.

### *Liberal Education and Everyday Life*

Finally, I want to turn to a third charge of elitism which is laid against liberal education: not merely that it addresses only the educational needs of future occupants of elite roles in society, or that it is an inappropriate imposition upon all students by an elite of professional educationists and politicians, but also that it fails to address the needs of "ordinary" people in their everyday preoccupations.

Some proponents of liberal education do, indeed, suggest that it is a life-irrelevant activity, having no extrinsic value, being merely the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. For example, O'Hear writes: "The challenge to the liberal educationalist is to defend the pursuit of excellence in learning for its own sake, against the view that learning is to be valued and pursued only to the extent that it is necessary to enable people to play their part in the good and natural life" (p. 8). The latter part of that quotation is extremely odd. What, one wonders, could be superior to the educational aim that people should learn to play their part in the good and natural life? Elsewhere, I have acknowledged the claims of knowledge acquired for its own sake.<sup>12</sup> Briefly, these have to do with the importance of disinterested learning, especially in academic life, following the path to knowledge wherever it might lead irrespective of one's own preferred outcomes and inclinations; with the need to maintain in the curriculum those subjects like history, literature, drama, music, and the plastic arts which are often dismissed as "frills," expendable when the imperatives of the marketplace and economic expedience press heavily upon the schools. But these defences of knowledge for its own sake in the curriculum have to be made in the context of two other imperatives.

First, there is the argument that knowledge must also be for the learner's sake, that individual idiosyncratic interests, capacities, social and ethnic backgrounds, and personal life histories, as well as aspirations for the future, must figure in our curricular calculations. For, to be disinterested is not to be uninterested. No individual can learn everything that could be learned for its own



sake, and from the encyclopedic knowledge potentially available to students, choices have to be made. It seems evident that one of the criteria affecting selection should be individual interest and relevance. Second, since individual learners live in particular times and places which colour their own interests and aspirations, the cultural significance of knowledge in a particular society should also affect our calculations of what knowledge is of most worth. For one of the problems of insisting that knowledge should be valued for its own sake, without the correlatives of "for the learner's sake" and for the sake of what is culturally valuable, is that it sanctions the teaching of all kinds of arcane esoterica in which particular schools or teachers might wish to indulge themselves.

Peters (1977), whose influential conception of education was built upon the proposition that the only worthwhile curricular activities are those having intrinsic value (the extrinsic benefits which undoubtedly accrue to education being only an overflow or contingent bonus), eventually came to reject the intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy: "I began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the dichotomies in terms of which liberal education is usually interpreted. In particular, I found difficulty with the dichotomy between "for its own sake" and for the sake of some practical end. . . . It seems to apply hardly at all to a sphere of knowledge sometimes referred to loosely as "the humanities," which is of central importance in any attempt to determine the type of knowledge which should form the content of liberal education" (p. 66). Yet, this apparent *volte face* of Peters should not be surprising. For in a context where he was still committed to the concept of worthwhile educational activities having only intrinsic values, he also wrote, "an educated person . . . is one whose whole range of actions, reactions and activities is gradually transformed by the deepening and widening of his understanding and sensitivity. . . . To be educated is not to have arrived at a destination; it is to travel with a different view" (Peters, 1973, pp. 19-20). This notion that educated persons cannot avoid living with renewed perspectives arising from their educational experiences, indeed as different persons, has clear implications for discussions of whether a particular curriculum is relevant to everyday life. Implicitly, travelling with a different point of view means having different perspectives on one's domestic life, one's work, one's citizenship, one's leisure, and one's relationships with other people, as well as potentially transforming one's own self-knowledge and aspirations. That is the "use" or life relevance of liberal education.

"Everyday life" is a notion that we commonly use unthinkingly and in most contexts its sense is tacitly understood without elaboration. But when we are discussing different kinds of knowledge or curricula in terms of their relevance for everyday life, we have to be more explicit about what kinds of activities constitute everyday life. Obviously, if we focus upon "every," then there is a quite limited range of activities which everyone engages in "every" day. These consist mainly of life's biological imperatives: eating, drinking, dressing, keeping warm (or cool, as the case may be), evacuating one's personal waste—activities to do with physical well being and the avoidance of disease. Outside the home, taking care of these necessities takes us commonly to shops, supermarkets, banks, doctors' offices, government departments, and so on. Most of us also travel to work (increasingly in our own transport which we have to learn to maintain), but there the similarity ends as we cross different thresholds into employments calling upon vastly different skills and cognitive

repertoires, and with large discrepancies in economic rewards and working amenities. And, indeed, the satisfying of what look like common, primitive, biological needs takes many different forms. Eating and drinking takes place at many levels of gastronomic sophistication; our dress can come from Marks and Spencer or the salons of haute couture; as our dwellings range from simple "cold water" rooming houses to architect-designed houses in the suburbs. When it comes to leisure (and some educational discussions of what is relevant to everyday life seem categorically instrumental, taking no account of a life of "play" which is not merely concerned with "bringing home the bacon"), our preferred activities are no less diverse. Much of the time, we watch television at home; but we also go to theatres, concert halls, art galleries, and museums. To be sure, many of these activities are not everyday preoccupations. But they are things that we might do any day, woven into the tapestry of our lives, worthwhile activities which we pursue whenever we have the time or money to free ourselves from necessary preoccupation with the mundane activities of keeping body and soul together.

Some will wish to cut through this almost infinite complexity of individual life-patterns or styles, simply dividing the activities I have noted along social class or ethnic lines, such that it is the "lower classes" which are prescribed an education relevant to the pedestrianism of daily life, whilst only the "higher" classes are privileged with an education of "high culture" or "high status knowledge." But even if these exclusionary categories are accepted as useful theoretical tools, the range of possible daily life activities are legion. No doubt the idle rich indulge themselves in one kind and level of activity, the increasing numbers of chronically poor another. Between those extremes, a hierarchy of occupational and economic strata call forth other patterns of life. But most Western social and educational systems pay lip service to the notion of equality of opportunity: the idea that no-one should be forever anchored to the station in life to which they were allocated at birth, especially through the limitations imposed by class-based educational institutions.

The notion of equal educational opportunity is inconsistent with the notion that we can ever articulate a catalogue of "necessary" life activities which could define a life-relevant curriculum—except, as we have noted, in terms of the common, primitive, biological imperatives of life. As soon as we move into the realm of the spiritual or the cultural, the areas of work and leisure, and accept a concept of education honouring the obligation to provide equality of opportunity for all children, we must reject any static notion of relevance which could define a "necessary" curriculum. There really is nothing more elitist than to deny any kind of knowledge or skill to other people's children, on the basis of some vague and unexamined conception of everyday life.<sup>13</sup>

Amongst the objections to liberal education offered by Noddings, a recent American critic, is the conclusion that the attempt to universalise liberal education must fail because affluent Americans are unwilling to provide the resources which a satisfactory implementation of it would entail.<sup>14</sup> Fortunately, generations of progressive educational reformers over the past two centuries have been undeterred by the self-satisfied, hostile greed of the American or any other nation's affluent class wanting to reserve a liberal education for its own. Though some radicals try to persuade us otherwise, legions of the underprivileged have been liberated from ignorance, illiteracy, and cultural philis-

tinism through the widening, if not the universalisation, of opportunities for liberal education. That liberal education also brings political and economic power is evident in terms of what we know of the superior life chances of those who have experienced it. On the whole, the better educated (in the conventional, liberal sense) are better fed, clothed, and housed; are healthier; have a longer life expectation; suffer much lower rates of infant mortality. Those who argue for the irrelevance of liberal education for the vast majority of ordinary people, must assume that, in their own way, alternative curricula will liberate, empower, and ameliorate the living conditions of ordinary people in a way that the liberal curriculum does for those who profit by it. In other words, any democratic, equalitarian ideology which sees liberal education as elitist and anti-democratic, must demonstrate that its proposed alternative has equal (if not superior) potency for the political efficacy, economic prosperity, and cultural enrichment of the majority of citizens. To accept anything less, especially because affluent citizens will resist proper educational provision except for their own children, is finally to capitulate to the postmodern, mean and recessive educational ideology of neo-conservatism.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>These different categorisations of liberal education are found in Hirst (forms of knowledge), Phenix (realms of meaning), and Oakeshott (voices).

<sup>2</sup>One has to admit that to use the word "elitist" in historical contexts where the existing hierarchical social order was taken for granted is anachronistic. The adjective "elitist," as distinct from the noun "elite," is a relatively modern coinage. Its use in the pejorative sense requires the existence of a large body of opinion which objects to the existence of socially privileged elites.

<sup>3</sup>As I have argued elsewhere (Entwistle, 1979), political and educational conservatism or radicalism do not always coincide.

<sup>4</sup>"Literature" is in quotation marks here to denote a wider sense of the word. Commonly, literature is taken to apply only to works of imaginative fiction, but there is also a sense in which it is appropriate to refer to the literature of philosophy, history, or science.

<sup>5</sup>G.H. Bantock is an example of such an educational conservative. See my discussion of his views in Entwistle, 1978, pp. 72-82.

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of this position (including bibliographical references), see Entwistle, 1978 and 1979.

<sup>7</sup>Both criticism and approval of Hirsch's position can be found in the special issue, titled Cultural Literacy of *The International Journal of Social Education*, 9(1), (Spring/Summer) 1994.

<sup>8</sup>This older radical tradition included Marx and Lenin themselves and subsequent generations of socialists (see Entwistle, 1979).

<sup>9</sup>Although participation in free elections gives the citizen little of the sense that he/she is exercising political intelligence in a distinctive way, these are clearly a necessary bulwark against tyranny. Elections are the way in which we rotate political elites in an effort to mitigate the evils to which they are prone.

<sup>10</sup>I have outlined such a conception which I called "associational democracy" (see Entwistle, 1971).

<sup>11</sup>I have recently suggested ways in which liberal education contributes to an understanding of particular political issues in a paper titled, "What Knowledge Is of Most Worth to Citizens" (see Entwistle, 1996).

<sup>12</sup>For elaboration of this discussion, see Entwistle, 1990.

<sup>13</sup>For discussion of a curriculum as necessary for everyday life, see Noddings, Chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup>Noddings, *loc. cit.*, argues that since affluent Americans have this lack of care for the education of all Americans, this itself is evidence for the failure of their own liberal education. But many of the reformers and their supporters who have campaigned over more than a century to improve the education of disadvantaged children were also products of the same school. There is no room here to address this issue at length. One hypothesis would be that one's schooling is largely irrelevant to the direction of one's political and social commitment. This, if true, would not make schooling worthless; it might be the case that that whilst liberal (or any other) education is not a sufficient determinant of the quality of one's citizenship, nevertheless it is a necessary contribution to it.

### References

- A. Bloom. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.
- H. Entwistle. *Political Education in a Democracy*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971.
- H. Entwistle. *Class, Culture and Education*. London: Methuen, 1978.
- H. Entwistle. *Antonio Gramsci*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.
- H. Entwistle. Schooling and the Instrumentally Valuable. In E.O. Miranda and R.F. Magsino (Eds.). London & New York: The Falmer Press, 1990.
- H. Entwistle. "What Knowledge is of Most Worth to Citizens," In J. Demaine and H. Entwistle (Eds.). *Beyond Communitarianism: Citizenship, Politics, and Education*. London: MacMillan, 1996.
- E.D. Hirsch. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.
- P.H. Hirst. *Knowledge and the Curriculum*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.
- R.M. Hutchins. *The Democratic Dilemma*. Uppsala: Alunquist & Wicksell, 1952.
- F.R. Leavis. *The Great Tradition*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1948.
- N. Noddings. *The Challenge to Care in Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1992.
- M. Oakshott. *The Voice of Liberal Learning*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989.
- A. O'Hear. *Education. Society and Human Nature*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.
- P.H. Phenix. *Realms of Meaning*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.
- R.S. Peters. *The Philosophy of Education*. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- R.S. Peters. *Education and the Education of Teachers*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977.