

## The normal function of the school in the Nation

by Marcien TOWA

The African revolution is under way, our conditions of life, our ways of thinking and feeling are undergoing profound changes. But what are the prospects of making a success of this revolution, of safely negotiating the storm and passing from the former equilibrium to a superior stability, from a pariah existence to one where humanity is fully developed and respected?

The external conditions for success exist : the right to our sovereignty is morally recognised throughout the huge African continent which abounds in natural wealth and sources of energy ; the international political climate is sufficiently favourable. Then remain the inhabitants : the success of the African revolution depends essentially upon the quality of Africans and the quality of their society ; all the more is this true since we must compensate for our numerical inferiority.

We shall succeed if we can manage to turn a spineless mass divided into tribes and wretched, little republics reduced to begging, into one great strongly organised people ; if we can transform an illiterate and timorous population, incapable of understanding the basic elements of world politics or even of suspecting its existence, into a politically conscious and mature people ; if we can succeed in changing our masses, chained to a ridiculous and fruitless labour, because of the rudimentary tools employed, into men equipped with a modern consciousness and modern techniques which infinitely increase the profitability of human efforts. Our greatest capital, our most powerful weapons are ourselves.

In short, the problems of education, of the intrinsic transformation of the African, is the heart of the African revolution : education in the family, education in the trade union and the party, education through the school, the theatre and the radio. In this article, we shall chiefly have in mind education in the narrow sense of the word, that given by the school : its nature and normal standards in any society and any nation. Later on, we hope to study its role under the colonial regime, that is, in a dominated society, and finally, its place in a new Cameroon and a new Africa.

### GENERALITIES ON PUBLIC SCHOOLING

#### 1) A brief historical survey

A brief historical survey shows that education is generally public. Any society, however rudimentary, has its own educational system and its own schools. Since antiquity, there has been much discussion upon the relative pros and cons of private, family and public education. But such discussion only ranged over a limited sphere of the educational system and upon the degree of homogeneity and coherence to be given to the nation. According to Fustel de Coulanges (*Cité Antique*, page 145), the Greek or Roman belonged at the same time to four societies organically interlocked in accordance with their numerical importance : the Family, the Phratry or Curia, the Tribe and the City, the latter embracing all the others. He did not enter all at the same time but progressed successively, as he grew up, from one to the other, starting with the family.

Each stage was celebrated by a more or less solemn ceremony. These progressive and public initiations essentially constituted the educational system as conceived for the average Greek (or Roman) before Plato.

The school, in the present meaning of the word, merely offered the teaching of reading, writing and arithmetic, and in addition, physical and musical education, secondary education being at that time non-existent. The problem of private or public education consisted merely in asking if, since everything depended on education, the city itself should also be responsible for teaching children to read, write and count, or whether it should leave this to the family. The first solution prevailed. *In effect*, Aristotle remarks, *as the City has but one purpose, it evidently follows that education must necessarily be one and the same for all.* (*Politics*, Book V, Chapter 1).

The same solution won the day in the western nations (we shall limit ourselves to the West since it constitutes a useful term of reference). We must note that the present dispute between partisans and opponents of free education has not the same significance as the one we have referred to. Throughout the Middle Ages and the *Ancien Régime*, education was public and entirely in the hands of the clergy. The revolutionaries attacked this monopoly because they reproached the clergy with collusion with conservative forces, the teaching offered evincing its dogmatic and hence antiscientific character.

This struggle ended with the monopoly of State teaching such as obtains in certain countries of the East. In France, a precarious balance was established between denominational teaching and neutral State education with a marked advantage for the latter.

It seems therefore fairly clear that it was basically a struggle between two groups of the French people, opposed, at one and the same time,

by self-interest, politics and ideology, each trying to obtain an educational monopoly, the trump-card par excellence for ensuring victory over its adversary.

As for the liberty sought by free education, there is no alternative but to see in this a mere weapon and a tactical withdrawal. It seems in fact out of the question that the clergy were the sincere self-appointed champions of the peaceful coexistence of ideologies and beliefs, since dogmatism and intolerance certainly appear to be the original sin of all religions. In the final analysis, the educational conflict expressed a profound division in the country.

On the contrary, if the traditional dispute over private and public education has political and ideological implications, it was above all related to its pedagogic nature : it concerned more the method than the content of education. In order to see its present influences, we should consider not the quarrel over education but the discussion between leaders of the new education over the usefulness and dangers of the individualisation of teaching, of its adaptation to each child's own character, the contents of education remaining essentially the same for all.

The school then is generally communal and public and can only be so to the extent that the State insists upon internal integration and cohesion.

## 2) The foundation of the public character of schools

This insistence derives from the fact that the primary justification for the school in society is society itself. Any society in fact finds itself in the conflicting obligation of having to renew itself in its different organs without ceasing to be itself. Since death continually decimates its constituent parts, it must provide for their parallel replacement by the young, just as the living organism must renew its cells without losing its identity. Only in growth does Society maintain its being.

Now the real being of any society which has to maintain itself is not nature, like the living organism, but culture : it is not the result of the spontaneous development of the innate, but the fruit of the conscious and laborious creative activity of the community.

Communal representations, institutions, the arts and all kinds of technical achievements, which is what social being amounts to, are historically the works of man and not natural products derived from the hereditary and biological structure of a race. The age of culture which, let it be repeated, says the being of society, creates, in the final analysis, the necessity for education, for public education, since it concerns the literate members of society as such. The proper function of education is to fill the gap existing between the child's naturalness and the adult's maturity, after having interiorized the culture of the society of which he is a member. Cultural experience, however, cannot be

bequeathed in the same way as material wealth by a one-sided will enriching an external heir. The latter must by his own arduous application recreate, in some fashion, his own group of culture, retravel to a certain extent and on his own responsibility, the road travelled by society, even if it be shortened ; and that is why society organises a more or less lengthy educational system, more or less complex, depending upon the importance of the experience it guards and which it has to hand down.

## 3) The Particular Nature of the Nation and Culture

We must now clear up a misunderstanding ; we are talking about society. In actual fact, society does not exist : there are only specially determined societies and each of them, the nation for example, has its origin of necessity in the struggle against physical and human obstacles, the exact repetition of which is impossible. A people invariably bears the deep and lasting imprint of its history and situation, or, to express oneself better, is indistinguishable, if cultured, from its history and situation, at least from the static point of view.

In other words, nations, in so far as they are determined societies, are units, each of them having its own values, its special beliefs and problems, its particular hatreds and aspirations. It is perfectly true that great currents of thought or beliefs such as communism, Christianity or Islam tend to efface frontiers and unite all men. Without underestimating the force of such currents, we cannot but remark that, for the Hebrews, for example, the 'Lord of Hosts' is the God of the hosts of Israel, the enemies of Israel are consequently the enemies of God. In principle, all men have one same Father who, aided by the Saints, watches over them with equal love and equal justice. But let a war break out between two nations ; the priests of the one will not hesitate to bless the nation's troops and weapons, invoking God and the patron Saints of the nation, that is to say, the historic or mythical ancestors, whilst the priests of the enemy nation do precisely the same.

Each ancient city had its deity or deities as protectors, its ancestors and spirits as guardians ; since then, evolution has only been apparent or on principle. On the level of actual religious experience, the only changes have been in detail. This tendency towards practical polytheism seems to be so irresistible that the contradiction with theoretical monotheism which it embraces is not normally perceived.

In actual fact, the tendency is a strong one, leading every race, however unimportant, to imagine itself invested by God or History with a mission embracing all humanity. It follows that opposing it means opposing God or History. And so, in this way, a people can exalt its mission, satisfy its aggressive instincts and greed by degrading other peoples or even exterminating them, at the same time rewarding itself with the satisfaction of having accomplished a sacred mission.

Probably it is an exaggeration to uphold with Bergson that to really pass from a closed society, a nation for example, to an open, universal society, humanity would firstly have to undergo a radical change transforming it into super-humanity. It is true that, in comparison with the universalist trends whose success may be hoped for, those of the nationalism constitute, for the moment, the forces of inertia the importance of which it would be dangerous to ignore. Until now, apart from regional groupings imposed by the imperatives of security or self-interest, the resistance of national particularisms has not been overcome. It is true that, today, any nation, to be in a position to play an effective role in history such as the USA or USSR, must be of the same order of importance. The division of the world into sovereign and often hostile nations can still last a long while; it will in any case remain so as long as the different regions of our planet are so unequally developed. The rôle of education must therefore be determined from a national view point.

#### 4) The Content of National Education

Precisely what can national education aim at? At training, that is essentially, imparting to the new generations the experience acquired and the methods for developing it so as to ensure the perenniality of the nation as an established society and satisfy its needs as well as, if not better than, in the past. These new generations must be produced from four categories of particularly essential trained personnel.

a) Each nation, in principle, possesses a class of original thinkers, of overall organisers whose rôle is to seek out and give expression to the aspirations and needs of the entire nation and to conceive, in relation to these needs and aspirations, to its demographic importance and to the mental level of the nation, the most efficient form of organization and the most likely one to satisfy them. They constitute the legislative body of the nation (and we are not thinking so much of the legislative assemblies).

b) The other category of specialists is formed by the producers and creators, those who are directly at grips with physical and human reality either to domesticate the forces of nature or to translate into works of art, that is, to humanise and domesticate, our dreams, passions, anguish. To them may be added the defenders of the nation. In all matters interesting the nation as such, it possesses an experience adapted to its situation, history and own needs, which has to be handed on to the youth. Depending upon the circumstances, the accent may be upon defence, art or economic productivity.

We must insist upon the present importance of the economy. Since Europe embarked upon the Industrial revolution, thus ensuring for itself, thanks to the enormous material power it derived from it, domination

over the rest of the world, the non-European nations have but one alternative: either they must in their turn achieve an industrial revolution, or else they must, for lack of energy or moral reasons, renounce industrialisation and resign themselves to disappearing from history.

An intense, speeded-up industrialisation appears to be the future prelude to any national development.

Now it is the habit to separate the educational problem (considered as a social question) and the economic problem; this can, wrongly, we feel, give the impression that education and economic development constitute two types of really separable problems. In actual fact, for a nation proposing to embark upon an economic revolution, school-education is not a problem annexed to the problem of development, it is at the heart of it. Instead, the rhythm of actual growth depends not only on capital, soil fertility, underground wealth and energy potential but, in addition and above all, upon the means that man can employ for their exploitation. The simplest and most traditional of those used by man is the force of his own labour. But by developing his knowledge of nature, by manufacturing continually improved implements in relation to this knowledge, he can indefinitely increase, by the action of matter upon matter, the production of the goods which he needs. The secret of Europe's power lies in science and technique which have taken such strides forward that their mastery necessitates huge expense and a vast programme for training scientists, engineers and specialised workers. No plan for economic revolution is conceivable that does not take into account this techno-scientific infrastructure.

Recourse to assistance can only constitute a transitional measure of limited scope for several reasons. Firstly, because all the great powers are themselves engaged in relentless competition so as to have the greatest possible economic power. The Soviet Union trains more engineers than the U. S. A. and almost four times as many as England, France, the Federal German Republic and Italy combined whose total population is around 200 millions inhabitants, almost as many as the Soviet Union. Now the latter, in its seven year plan, provides for more than double the number of engineers annually leaving its establishments. Thus the country in the world by far the best equipped in scientists and highly qualified technicians has still got to accelerate the training of its cadres for its own economic development. What about the other powers then? In France, the lack of trained personnel of all kinds is alarming in itself, as the daily press bears witness. Technical assistance, therefore, can only be very limited. Another serious disadvantage is that foreign technicians are not simply technicians, they have their own political ideas, their views on the economy, on social and other problems which they broadcast. Now their views are not necessarily consistent with the development requirements of the country that is being assisted.

It would not be difficult to reveal other dangers inherent in technical assistance, particularly a certain mendicant attitude on the part of those assisted, the inadaptation of foreign technicians to an environment very different from that for which they were trained.

It follows that recourse to technical assistance should be undertaken with caution and could only be at best a provisional solution and a makeshift. A serious economic development plan, today a vital necessity in all countries and especially underdeveloped countries, postulates the simultaneously developed training of the country's own cadres at all levels, of qualified workmen, engineers and scientists.

c) The policy makers or overall organisers constituting the legislative core of society and the producers and transformers are linked together by the executive comprising the Government and its administration. The effectiveness of this class, that is, the rapidity and loyalty with which decisions are implemented, depends both on their competence and their integrity.

d) Finally a class has to be provided for, responsible for controlling the proper running of the whole of the system, supervising the observance of laws and correcting deviations where necessary.

#### 5) The National and Public School

It seems fairly clear then, we think, that the school has to be both public and national. National and not universal, since it replies to the needs of the nation in its position as a society to a great extent closed in on itself with its special problems and special collective conscience. In saying this, we do not want to lay down a principle of xenophobia and national egoism but simply to indicate clearly what constitutes the effective and necessary behaviour of nations, even of those the most favourably disposed to internationalism, and which is often concealed for politically expedient reasons.

The Soviet seven year plan insists, to a large extent, and with reason, upon the interrelationship of school and life, that is to say, with the proper function of essential economic enlightenment. China does the same. Now as economic reality in both countries is a very different thing, the school adapted to this reality is also different.

The school must, apart from this, be public and not at the mercy of individual whims or sectarian quarrels. As its first task is to train the personnel we have mentioned who constitute the nations back-bone, it is, for that reason, a matter concerning the community itself, its purpose is national collectiveness as such. Division and dispersal of the school would mean the division and disposal of the nation itself, its paralysis and collapse.

#### 6) Nation and Individual

Viewed in this light, the nation appears as an absolute which individuals must serve and to which they must submit and be sacrificed. In deed, there are a number of philosophers, especially German, who tend to privilege society at the expense of the individuals comprising it by attributing to society a being transcendent in itself. We are not obliged to accept this conception. It seems more acceptable and normal to consider society as a simple means (a necessary means, it is true) to enable individuals to exercise, through union and organization, more effective action in a certain number of fields: security, work, etc.

Society in itself, as a transcendent entity, could only be an abstraction realised by a classical process by which man becomes the prisoner of his own hypostatized imaginings.

In actual fact, the relationship between the individual and society seems to be much more intricate. For the individual can in no wise emerge, outside of society, nor can society be conceived without the individuals composing it. What actually exists is not a society in itself nor an isolated individual but simply a whole formed by the individuals living in society. Society and individuals come into existence at the same time by a reciprocal genesis, persons emerging from society and society being constructed upon the emergence of these persons. If we consider this whole from the point of view of society, the individual offers himself as a means of service to the individual. In the one case as in the other, this would be a mistaken perspective, as the reality is the whole constituted by individuals organised in society.

#### 7) The Paradox of Education

This ambiguity characterising the relations between society and individuals is at the base of the fundamental paradox of any education which aims at the integration of young people destined to replace their elders in pre-established cadres, by offering them the elders' experience. As it is not for the young to select these cadres, integration is, to their mind, a sort of constraint. But in the experience to be transmitted to the young, we must distinguish between, on the one hand, acquisitions and discoveries and, on the other hand, methods of investigation and acquisition. Now, if the teaching of acquired knowledge lies within the province of memory, that of method is rather a matter for judgement and reason and in that way it favours the emergence of freedom and the individual. But education can have, as a mission, the development of individuals. But there is also the danger of freedom destroying the very framework which enabled its birth. Accordingly, freedom can only be born of the constraint that society exercises over the individual through education, whereas freedom born of social constraint, in order to affirm itself, has to challenge and threaten constituted society. The pedagogic stratagem can

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overcome this basic two-fold contradiction : denying freedom by constraint in order to encourage freedom, but endangering the existing society by encouraging freedom through education.

The school is the indispensable medium for ensuring the link between the old and new generations, the absolute condition on which any nation survives. For the individual, on the other hand, it constitutes a zone, as it were, of secondary growth (the first being specific virtualities) thanks to which he effectively develops, attains his full stature in autonomy, and keeps up the onward movement of society. The school therefore lies at the centre of any revolution. That is why all reformers are preoccupied with education, from Lycurgus and Solon to the Marxists and including Rabelais, Montaigne, Luther, Rousseau and many others.

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