The foundations of the education policy of the American military government (February 19, 1947)

Abstract

In this speech, delivered in German, educator John W. Taylor, who headed the Education Department of the U.S. military government in occupied Germany from 1945 to 1947, laid out its principles for reorganizing the German school and education system after the collapse. Taylor had spent several years in Germany, where he worked as a high school teacher and guest lecturer at universities, among other positions, and was thus well acquainted with the prewar German educational system.

Source

Speech by the head of the education section of the Office of the Military Government of the United States, John W. Taylor, before the State Ministry for Education and Culture in Munich

Dear Minister, members of the ministry, dear attendees,

It is with great pleasure that I take this opportunity to discuss with you the basic outlines of the education policy of the American military government.

Our goal is the democratization of Germany. I know that you are willing to work with us on this task. In your hands and ours lies the responsibility for the youth and thus for the fate of the future Germany.

In a democracy, the power of the state emanates from the people. Each individual, the “common man,” as we say, shares the responsibility for the act of the representative of the state. The education of all to a civic-minded attitude and stance is thus the first and indispensable requirement. Moreover, the best democracy will be the one in which each individual is given the possibility for the highest development of his individual abilities, whatever the external conditions of his birth may have been. […]

Let me turn to the actual school questions. The German school reflects the undemocratic division of the German people into social groups and classes. The democratic school secures all citizens an educational opportunity that is equal but different, depending on talent and vocational orientation. In that sense it is a differentiated comprehensive school.

The differentiation between the school of the masses and the school of the leading strata has led to a duality even in school administration and in financing. The unitary democratic school requires a unitary school administration and the equal financing of all types of schools from general tax revenues. The entire school administration should be concentrated with the government of each state and with the district governments. The communities, too, shall participate in the life of the school in manifold ways and on a large scale.

The structure of the school should also be uniform. Hitherto, the school kindergarten has been neglected in the land of Froebel. Even when today’s time of adversity is over, it will be indispensable as the initially optional substructure of the school system. If at all possible, it should be created. The duration of the elementary school, internally structured after the fourth year, is best set at six years. From here every child moves on to the continuing school, which is only in this sense a ‘higher’ school. This will end the overlap of *Volksschule* and higher school. The higher school, too, must be internally structured into

tracks. The academic school, which hitherto alone has borne the distinguishing name of the higher school, becomes a relatively small track with a largely common three-year foundation and a bifurcated three-year upper level. Within the framework of this upper level there will be plenty of opportunity to cultivate the humanities, which I certainly appreciate as much as you do. However, I do not believe that they can be properly cultivated only in a school of eight to nine grades, in which about 40% of classroom hours are devoted to the classical languages, as proposed by a plan recently submitted to us.

The traditional, strongly socially conditioned types of the higher school thus disappear in our plan. Alongside the academic branch are the fully equal branches that are attended by the vast majority – 90% and more of all students! – and are becoming more and more vocationally oriented. The general education subjects remain the core of all parallel tracks. To emphasize the equality of the academic and the non-academic tracks, it is desirable to combine them into one school, wherever possible.

Full obligatory schooling should be expanded for all children of the German nation up to the age of 15. With this we are adopting a demand that was already raised by teachers in the last years of the Weimar Republic for social and pedagogical reasons. Likewise, the expansion of partial obligatory schooling to age 18 and the increase of hours in the vocation-oriented school to about 12 per week is no novelty.

Five difficulties that could stand in the way of such a unitary school structure can be overcome provided there is a will to do it.

1. It presupposes exemption from school fees and plenty of education grants. All states in the American zone have taken important steps forward in this direction in their constitutions. In the interest of national education, the solution proposed by us should gradually be adopted in its entirety.

2. The great majority of schools are single-class schools. The structure proposed here presupposes a certain school size. Consolidation, which is what we call the process of combining and differentiating the schools in America, should be begun today.

3. The German people are confessionally divided. Where the constitution permits confessional schools, or where they are the rule, only very small, high-performance schools may result. I hope that both confessions will come to an amicable agreement in every case in order to eliminate this difficulty.

4. Private schools will also be permitted in the future. In general, they cannot achieve the diverse structure of the public schools. They should be authorized only where they implement pedagogical plans that are still outside of the framework of the general school, that is, as experimental schools.

5. The greatest difficulty lies in the centuries-old tradition of the German school forms. Families whose members have grown up for generations with a classical education are passionately attached to it and consider it far superior to any other. But please, look at the reality! The higher school in the old German sense, the privileged school, is an injustice against the masses of the German people and an anachronism in a world that is becoming democratic.

The curriculum of the German school has undoubtedly conveyed to the youth a rich treasure of knowledge. But the education of the citizen and social education, without which a democracy cannot survive, as I have said, was always its stepchild. That is why we place the greatest value not only in finally giving the social sciences their proper place within the curriculum, but also in giving students overall the opportunity to become democratically active in responsible self-government and in the day-to-day interactive teaching [*Arbeitsunterricht*]. We hope that the commission of teachers of the social sciences, which has been sent by Washington and is currently traveling through Germany, will bring rich stimuli to the German schools. […]

In the past, the German universities achieved remarkable things in the scientific training of the youth. But

their political stance in the First World War and during the Hitler period was very unfortunate. With too few exceptions, they were nationalistic and militaristic in attitude. Thus it surely is not appropriate to complain about the severity of their de-Nazification. Where missteps have happened, the dismissals will be reversed following the close examination of individual cases. But surely the great misstep was not de-Nazification, but the acceptance of the Nazi doctrine and the lack of civil courage among too many university teachers. Do not forget that!

There is no doubt that the highest schools of the land must assume the leadership in the process of democratization. That is also why you will have to relinquish some noble traditions hallowed by age. I mention the guild constitution, which is very aristocratic, the social structuring of the student body, which did not change sufficiently either during the time of the Republic, or under the Nazis, or to this day; I mention the traditional, authoritarian methods of passing on knowledge in huge lectures and the neglect of the social sciences and civic education. The committees set up by the Heidelberg Rectors' Conference have not met yet. We expect that this will happen soon, and that they will do a thorough job.

We strive to help the universities in every way so that they may reach their old scientific heights again. That is the reason we have promoted the plan of the research university in Berlin with special affection. We hope that a wealth of stimuli will emanate from there and that the life of science in Germany will be fertilized. It is my pleasant duty to thank all those who have so warmly supported this plan in the three federal states and who have provided funds for it.

I am confident that you will be pleased to follow our democratic guidelines, and I await your proposals on their implementation.

Rest assured that all members of the education department in Berlin and in the federal states are perfectly willing to provide you, in your difficult work, with all the support that is within their powers

Source: Hans v. Merkt, ed., *Dokumente zur Schulreform in Bayern* (Munich, 1952), 54–59; printed in Udo Wengst and Hans Günther Hockerts, *Geschichte der Sozialpolitik in Deutschland. Bd. 2: 1945–1949: Die Zeit der Besatzungszonen. Sozialpolitik zwischen Kriegsende und der Gründung zweier deutscher Staaten* (Baden-Baden, 2001), 290–292.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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