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EDUCATION IN A COMMUNIST COUNTRY

by Ludwik Dembinski

I was asked to give you a talk about education in a communist state. I am not an educator myself so my views on these problems will be perhaps too general. Nevertheless I will try to show you the most important points. I will not speak about the Marxist theory of education which you can find in Marxist books, which, I am afraid, are even too easily available in every part of the world. My purpose is to show the general outlines of the educational system and of its work in a concrete communist state, in my country Poland. Since I have never studied this particular problem it is difficult for me to say precisely to what extent the Polish educational system is typical of a communist state. However, as, during the last eleven years the communist states have adapted all their institutions to those existing in Soviet Russia rather than to their own needs and traditions, I am fairly certain that it would be true to say that a good deal of this same educational system can be found in other communist countries in Eastern Europe. On the other hand the general changes taking place in Poland as well as those in its educational system are part of the specific situation existing for about one and a half years in that country. In this respect I think it is impossible to generalize at present, at any rate.

I think it would be useful to set my talk on education against some more general political background. Certainly communism as a political system has an unsurpassed ability to adapt the whole of the political, social, and economic life of states to a purely theoretical doctrine, thought out partly by Marx a hundred years ago, and partly by Lenin and Stalin. But certainly even this system with its enormous possibilities of breaking down every obstacle on its way to set up political aims, sometimes must take into account facts which it would be too dangerous for it to step on. Sometimes these facts are purely social but sometimes they are of the supernatural order, the existence of which Marxism tries by all means to negate. One must know something about these facts to understand the situation in each communist state.

It may not be necessary for me to remind you that the communists seized power in Poland in 1944. They did this not by their own means, nor thanks to any support by the Polish people. The only force which made this possible in Poland as in most of the other East European countries was the Soviet red army. At that time the Polish people were at least ninety percent Roman Catholic and I think even a greater percent anti-communist. For this reason it is doubtful if the Communists could ever have seized power were it not for the fact that the Germans had destroyed all the social and political institutions during the previous five years. The communists took the initiative in the reconstruction

of these institutions so that they could do so in accordance with their own aims and purposes. Even then they proceeded very cautiously. Apart from the nationalization of large agricultural and industrial properties, the communists took over the former organization of the state. This is true also for the field of education. Up until after the war and in the early years of the communist regime there were many primary and secondary schools run by the Church. However as the position of the Communist Party grew stronger, by means of gradual elimination of all actual and potential opposition, and the growing efficiency of the police system, directed in the last instance from the desk of Stalin, the entire structure of the state was overthrown and by 1952 was replaced by the most genuine Stalinist system, with all its implications.

During 1956 the situation in Poland changed almost overnight. There are, I think, three major facts which made this change possible: for one the death of Stalin, which I should say is the turning point in the history of communism; secondly the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in February 1956, which was only one of the consequences of the former; and lastly but not the least important the death of Bierut, the devoted-to-Russia, leader of the Polish Communist Party.

The general public discontent found its expression not only in very strong criticism in the press, which from a subservient tool in the hands of the most Stalinist fraction of the party changed suddenly into a force preparing the forthcoming evolution of the political system, but also in very strong riots in Poznan of June 1956. Under its pressure the party adopted amore liberal policy. In October 1956 W. Gomulka took over the leadership of the Communist Party. His well known nationalist tendencies, his sincerity and honesty won him great popularity. At the same time a large number of the most Stalinist party leaders were dismissed and Marshall Rokosowski a Soviet general, dependent directly from the Kremlin, was forced to leave Warsaw. From that time the situation greatly improved in nearly all respects. But it is not my purpose to tell you about that now at greater length.

Please forgive me for the length of my introduction and let me come to the real topic of my talk. As I have already mentioned, I am not an educator nor a theorist, but at most an observer. And this is why I will limit myself to what communist education is in practice. In this I will try to stress atleast some points which have been discussed at some length in the previous lectures.

Marxism has not yet worked out any general concept of the human being which is the only possible basis of any real educational system. I think that it is an implication of the character of Marxism that whatever it pretends, or seems to be, in reality it is only a purely political doctrine aiming at some quite plainly defined aims. All the philosophical base or rather superstructure of Marxism is good for intellectuals to play with



But once the communists have seized power all these things do not matter any more, even if they are much talked about. The only thing that really matters then is the building up of a so-called socialist state, the outlines and dictates of which were drawn up by the great Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. Everything must serve this ultimate aim, and education has an outstanding part to play. The schools and Universities are mere factories producing human material adapted for the construction and running of the huge enterprise called the socialist state. The best material is then, a man with a certain amount of practical knowledge, be it in law, economics, history, technical science or politics, and a certain one sided intellectual formation preventing him from being able to judge for themselves. This intellectual formation is called the only true "scientific concept of the world" (weltanschauung). I need not add that the problem of the formation of the human person as such does not exist. Official propaganda, of course, always says that the aim of the communist educational system is only the developing of real human values. Nevertheless the educational system built up in the years 1949-1952 left no doubt at all as to its real purposes.

For a proper running of a modern state a minimum of general education is required from every citizen. Understanding this, communists, with an enormous effort, managed to build up a system of primary schools which enabled them to give elementary education to practically all children and to raise the compulsory standard of education to seven years. The school programme was aimed first of all at giving the maximum of practical knowledge. History and literature were presented in such a way as to confirm the Marxist concept of history and social evolution. In fact the boys or girls of fourteen, after seven years of education in Poland, did not know who Alexander the Great, Charlemagne, or Cromwell were, but knew exactly how human society evolved, from a "primitive community" to the system based on slavery and up to socialism. They knew by heart the curriculum vitae of all outstanding communists leaders. I need not add that in such a school there was no place for the teaching of religion.

This same system was adopted in the secondary schools. Great stress was laid on the development of highly specialized technical schools. General secondary schools were meant to prepare students mainly for further studies in high technical schools. Nearly all the general matters aiming at the formation of the student were eliminated. In effect, a boy, after eleven years in school, apart from sciences, has only a very limited amount of information, most of which he knew was not true, and he was aware that the teacher knew it also.

It was a matter of course that during this period all private Catholic schools were closed with the exception of about five or ten, at the most.

In the communist state the University is nothing but the continuation at the highest level of the system of teaching in primary and secondary schools. The autonomy of the University doesn't exist: as all science is subdued to the official doctrine. Even titles of honour, like doctor for instance, were accorded not by the University but directly by the Minister of Education.

The University system adopted also the narrow specialization and many new special faculties and courses were cut down from five to three years. It was made possible by elimination of general subjects and by increase in the number of lectures every student had to attend. It led to such absurdities as, for instance, the fact that sometimes a student had fifty hours weekly---of lectures and seminars, which he was bound under disciplinary measures to attend. It is obvious that he would have no time left for individual work. All the professors and lecturers had to lecture according to a very restricted programme, worked out by the Ministry of Education. In this situation graduation depended only on the number of facts and formulae memorized by the student.

After completing his studies everyone was given a job according to his specialty without any possibility of choice, and he was not permitted to leave this position for three years.

All professors as well as students were bound by a tacit convention according to which one lectured and the other learned things that both knew perfectly well not to be true. It taught all the young people an absolute irresponsibility for their own words.

Here I must mention two anomalies in the University life of Poland. The first one is that until 1953 faculties of Catholic Theology existed at two Universities, namely Krakow and Warsaw, and were recognized by the state as well as the Church. The second one is the uninterrupted existence of the Catholic University of Lublin. Its position proved to be too strong to let the government attack it directly. In spite of enormous difficulties it managed to subsist losing only the faculty, which was closed by the government in 1952. The merits of the Catholic University of Lublin, in upholding high standards of University education and in spreading Catholic thought, cannot be overestimated. We must bear in mind that it was the only oasis in the territory ranging from the Elbe to the Pacific, where even in the worse times of Stalinism discussions between Catholics and Marxists were held openly. And there is no need to stress the fact that the latter group was not the winning side.



After the war a large number of youth organizations were active in Poland but only a small minority of them were communist or even socialist. In 1949 the communists put their hands on all the youth organizations. All of them were liquidated, among all Catholic movements. Many of their leaders were given long prison terms. The one or two organizations created in their place had purely communistic characters and were directly dependent on the Communist Party. Their activities lacked any spontaneity and only managed to subsist thanks to large grants given to them by the state. Those members of these groups who were not out for their own personal gain, paid the least attention possible to the groups. It is hardly necessary to add that these organizations did not afford the opportunity for its members to develop their personalities but rather deprived them of this opportunity. The change that occurred in Poland during the last year has not really altered this particular situation. And I do not see, at present, any possibility of starting any Catholic youth organization in Poland.

This system of education proved to be a failure in the social, scientific, and economic fields. A fact not only obvious to every thinking man but also admitted now by the Polish government. The reasons for this failure are obvious. One of the unfortunate results of this system was that the graduates were incapable of taking the initiative in their positions. Also specialists with narrow outlooks could not be efficient in industry. The failure to teach ethical principals in schools resulted in moral indifference. The lack of training for social work based on personal disinterest and sound moral convictions, causes a lack of feeling for social responsibility.

During the past year a great deal of work has been undertaken by the government to change the system of education and to improve it. I will not go into the details of these reforms as they are not at all typical of a communist state, and it is too early to judge their scope.

At the end of my talk I would like to be a little more optimistic and say that the situation of our youth is not as bad as one would be apt to suppose considering the facts that I have just mentioned. The deeply rooted, deeper than we dared to hope, attachment of the Polish people to the Catholic faith prevented the youth from total failure. Even if they are not sufficiently trained, even if they are apathetic and cannot find the truth by themselves, nevertheless the majority are aware that something is wrong with them. Certainly it is the great task of Catholics to help them come back to the right path. The means at our disposal, as compared with yours in the West, are certainly very poor. It is for us to find a way to use them more efficiently. But I think you here and everywhere could help us a great deal by praying for our success.