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### PRIMARY SOURCE READING

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Orestes Brownson was introduced in Chapter 3 as a member of the Democratic Party, a journalist, and a political and educational critic of Horace Mann. The following excerpt is a wide-ranging critique of Mann's political, religious, and educational aims for common schooling. Brownson further assails the wisdom of the normal-school effort which Mann successfully began in Massachusetts.

Part of Brownson's critique is grounded in a view of the educated person similar to Aristotle's notion of "the cultivation of human excellence for its own sake," an ideal that Brownson believes Mann is abandoning in favor of education for instrumental social ends. In making this argument, Brownson particularly invokes the distinction between "special" and "general" education, a distinction borrowed from the Greeks and still important, though often overlooked, in our contemporary debates over educational goals. In considering what it means to be educated as a distinctively human being, Brownson attacks Mann's common-schooling approach to religious education as an abandonment of what gives religion its essential value to human life, and he argues that Mann's academically narrow and standardized teacher-education curriculum will only exacerbate this problem.

Brownson assails Mann's common-schooling ideas on other fronts as well, relying on Jeffersonian ideals of democratic localism in doing so.

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### DECENTRALIZATION: ALTERNATIVE TO BUREAUCRACY?

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*Orestes Brownson*

We can hardly be expected at this late day, in this ancient commonwealth especially, to go into any labored argument in favor of popular education, either as a matter of right or as the only firm foundation of a free government. For ourselves, we hold that every child born into a community is born with as good a natural right to the best education that community can furnish, as he is to a share of the common air of heaven or the common light of the sun. We hold also that the community, which neglects to provide the best education it can for all its children, whether male or female, black or white, rich or poor, bond or free, forfeits its right to punish the offender. We hold, moreover, that a popular government unsupported by popular education is a baseless fabric.

But, while we bear our unequivocal testimony in favor of universal education and assert the duty of every community to provide the best education in its power for all its children, we are very far from regarding everything which passes, or may pass under the name of education, as something to be approved and never condemned. Education may be bad as well as good, a curse as well as a blessing; and in general its quality is a matter of even more importance than its quantity. Educated, in some sense, all our children are, and will be, whether we will or not. Education, such as it is, is ever going on. Our children are educated in the streets, by the influence of their associates, in the fields and on the hillsides, by the influences of surrounding scenery and overshadowing skies, in the bosom of the family, by the love and gentleness or wrath and fretfulness of parents, by the passions or affections they see manifested, the conversations to which they listen, and above all by the general pursuits, habits, and moral tone of the community. In all these are schoolrooms and schoolmasters sending forth scholars educated for good or for evil or, what is more

From "Second Annual Report of the Board of Education, Together with the Second Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board" (Boston, 1839), review in the *Boston Quarterly Review* 2 (October 1839, 393-418).

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likely, for a little of both. The real question for us to ask is not, Shall our children be educated? but, To what end shall they be educated, and by what means? What is the kind of education needed, and how shall it be furnished?

As an individual I am something more than the farmer, the shoemaker, the blacksmith, the lawyer, the physician, or the clergyman. Back of my professional character there lies the man, that which I possess in common with all my species and which is the universal and permanent ground of my being as a man. This education must reach, call forth, and direct as well as my professional pursuit. Individual education is divided then into general education and special—my education as a man and my education as a doctor, lawyer, minister, artisan, artist, agriculturalist, or merchant.

Special education appears to be that which we at present are most anxious to make provision for. Few people think of anything beyond it. The popular doctrine, we believe, is that we should be educated in special reference to what is to be our place in society and our pursuit in life. We think more of education as a means of fitting us for a livelihood than for anything else. The tendency has long been to sink the man in what are merely his accidents, to qualify him for a profession or pursuit, rather than to be a man. . . .

General education, which some may term the culture of the soul, which we choose to term the education of humanity, we regard as the first and most important branch of education. This is the education which fits us for our destiny, to attain our end as simple human beings. . . .

Man has a destiny, an end he should seek to gain, and religion is the answer to the question, What is this end, this destiny? According to the principles we have laid down then, education, to be complete, to be what it ought to be, must be religious. An education which is not religious is a solemn mockery. Those who would exclude religion from education are not yet in the condition to be teachers; long years yet do they need to remain in the primary school.

Man is also a social being and needs an education corresponding to his social nature. He is not a mere individual. He stands not alone . . . that deserves not the name of a social education which leaves untouched the problem of society, the destiny of the race. And the social education must needs vary precisely as vary our solutions of this problem. In Russia they solve this problem in their fashion. Society has there for its object the accomplishment of the will and the manifestation of the glory of the Autocrat. Hence, the Russian children are carefully taught, by authority, that they and all they may possess are his and that they must love him in their hearts and honor him as their God. In Austria the problem is solved much in the same way and so also in Prussia. Absolutism has its solution and educates accordingly. Liberalism has also its solution and its corresponding education. . . . If the aristocratic element be the true foundation of social order, then should our schools be under the control of the aristocracy, be aristocratic in their basis and superstructure, and be nurseries of the aristocratic principle. But, if the democratic element be the true basis of society, then should the social education give the democratic solution of the problem, create a love for democracy, and discountenance every aristocratic tendency. It should, also, not only accept the democratic element but disclose the means by which it may insure the victory and make all other social elements subordinate to itself. It must, then, touch the nature and organization of the state, determine the mission of government and the measures it must adopt in order to secure or advance the democracy. It rushes into the midst of politics, then, and decides on national banks and subtreasuries. An education which does not go thus far is incomplete and insufficient for our social wants.

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Education, then, must be religious and social, or political. Neither religion nor politics can be excluded. Indeed, all education that is worth anything is either religious or political and fits us for discharging our duties either as simple human beings or as members of society. . . .

Assuming now the absolute necessity of religious and political education, and the worthlessness of every other kind of education, when taken alone, the great and the practical question becomes, How is this education to be provided? In what schools and under what schoolmasters?

We have looked into the reports before us, with the hope of finding an answer to this question, but here (as everywhere else in the world) we have been doomed to disappointment. . . . The normal schools, which the board proposes to establish, will do nothing to impart such an education as we contend for. The most we can hope from them is some little aid to teachers in the methods of teaching. Beyond improving the mechanism of education, they will be powerless or mischievous.

Schools for teachers require in their turn teachers, as well as any other class of schools. Who, then, are to be the teachers in these normal schools? What is to be taught in them? Religion and politics? What religion, what politics? These teachers must either have some religious and political faith, or none. If they have none, they are mere negations and therefore unfit to be entrusted with education of the educators of our children. If they have a religious and a political faith, they will have one which only a part of the community hold to be true. If the teachers in these schools are Unitarians, will Trinitarians accept their scholars as educators? Suppose they are Calvinists, will Universalists, Methodist, Unitarians, and Quakers be content to install their pupils as instructors in common schools?

But the board assure us Christianity shall be insisted on so far, and only so far, as it is common to all sects. This, if it mean anything, means nothing at all. All who attempt to proceed on the principle here laid down will find their Christianity ending in nothingness. Much may be taught in general, but nothing in particular. No sect will be satisfied; all sects will be dissatisfied. For it is not enough that my children are not educated in a belief contrary to my own; I would have them educated to believe what I hold to be important truth; and I always hold that to be important truth, wherein I differ from others. . . .

If we come into politics, we encounter the same difficulty. What doctrines on the destiny of society will these normal schools inculcate? If any, in this commonwealth, at present, they must be Whig doctrines, for none but Whigs can be professors in these schools. . . . Establish, then, your Whig board of education; place on it a single Democrat, to save appearances; enable this board to establish normal schools and through them to educate this board to establish normal schools and through them to educate all the children of the commonwealth, authorize them to publish common-school libraries, to select all the books used in schools, and thus to determine all the doctrines which our children shall imbibe, and what will be the result? We have then given to some half a dozen Whigs the responsible office of forming the political faith and conscience of the whole community. . . .

The truth is, we have, in the establishment of this board of education, undertaken to imitate despotic Prussia, without considering the immense distance between the two countries. . . .

Let it be borne in mind that in Prussia the whole business of education is lodged in the hands of government. The government establishes the schools in which it prepares the teachers; it determines both the methods of teaching and the matters taught. It commissions all teachers and suffers no one to engage in teaching without authority from

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itself. Who sees not then that all the teachers will be the pliant tools of the government and that the whole tendency of the education given will be to make the Prussians obedient subjects of Frédéric the king? Who sees not that education in Prussia is supported merely as the most efficient arm of the police and fostered merely for the purpose of keeping out revolutionary or, what is the same thing, liberal ideas?

A government system of education in Prussia is not inconsistent with the theory of Prussian society, for there all wisdom is supposed to be lodged in the government: But the thing is wholly inadmissible here not because the government may be in the hands of Whigs or Democrats, but because, according to our theory, the people are supposed to be wiser than the government. Here the people do not look to the government for light, for instruction, but the government looks to the people. The people give the law to the government. To entrust, then, the government with the power of determining the education which our children shall receive is entrusting our servant with the power to be our master. This fundamental difference between the two countries, we apprehend, has been overlooked by the board of education and its supporters. In a free government, there can be no teaching by authority, and all attempts to teach by authority are so many blows struck at its freedom. We may as well have a religion established by law, as a system of education, and the government educate and appoint the pastors of our churches, as well as the instructors of our children. . . .

Introduce now a system of normal schools under the supervision of a government board of education. These schools must be governed by popular men, men of reputation, not men who have the good of the people at heart and are known only by their infidelity to popular interests, but men who are generally regarded as safe, in whom the mass of the active members of the community have confidence. But on what condition does a man come into this category of popular men? Simply on the condition that he represent, to a certain extent, the opinions now dominant. . . .

In order to be popular, one must uphold things as they are, disturb the world with no new views, and alarm no private interest by uttering the insurrectionary word, Reform. He must merely echo the sentiments and opinions he finds in vogue; and he who can echo these the loudest, the most distinctly, and in the most agreeable voice, is sure to be the most popular man—for a time. Men of this stamp do never trouble their age; they are never agitators, and there is no danger that they will stir up any popular commotion; they are the men to be on boards of education, professors in colleges, constables, mayors, members of legislative assemblies, presidents, and parish clerks. . . .

In consequence of this invariable law of Providence, the men who can be placed at the head of the normal schools, if established, will not be the men who represent the true idea of our institutions or who will prepare their pupils to come forth educators of our children for the accomplishment of the real destiny of American society. They will teach them to respect and preserve what is, to caution them against the licentiousness of the people, the turbulence and brutality of the mob, the dangers of anarchy and even of liberty; but they will rarely seek to imbue them with a love of liberty, to admonish them to resist the first encroachments of tyranny, to stand fast in their freedom, and to feel always that it is nobler to die, nay, nobler to kill, than to live a slave. They will but echo the sentiments of that portion of the community on whom they are the more immediately dependent, and they will approve no reform, no step onward, till it has been already achieved in the soul of the community.

We confess, therefore, that we cannot look for much to meet the educational wants of the community, from the favorite measures of the Massachusetts Board of

Normal  
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Education. In the view of this respectable board, education is merely a branch of general police, and schoolmasters are only a better sort of constables. The board would promote education, they would even make it universal, because they esteem it the most effectual means possible of checking pauperism and crime and making the rich secure in their possessions. Education has, therefore, a certain utility which may be told in solid cash saved to the commonwealth. This being the leading idea, the most comprehensive view which the board seem to take of education, what more should be expected from their labors except such modifications and improvements as will render it more efficient as an arm of general police? More, we confess, we do not look for from their exertions. The board is not composed of men likely to attempt more, and even if it were composed of other men, with far other and more elevated and comprehensive views, more could not be effected. Boards of trade may do something, but boards of education and boards of religion are worthy of our respect only in proportion to their imbecility. To educate a human being to be a man, to fulfill his destiny, to attain the end for which God made him, is not a matter which can, in the nature of things, come within the jurisdiction of a board, however judiciously it may be constituted.

Nevertheless, the board may, perhaps, do something. There is room to hope that it will do something to improve the construction of schoolhouses and to collect the material facts concerning the state of education as it now is; and, judging from the accompanying report of its accomplished secretary, it may also affect some progress in the methods of teaching our children to spell. This will be considerable and will deserve gratitude and reward. Nothing desirable in matters of education, beyond what relates to the finances of the schools, comes within the province of the legislature. More than this the legislature should not attempt; more than this the friends of education should not ask. Let the legislature provide ample funds for the support of as many schools as are needed for the best education possible of all the children of the community, and there let it stop. The selection of teachers, the choice of studies and of books to be read or studied, all that pertains to the methods of teaching and the matters to be taught or learned are best left to the school district. In these matters, the district should be paramount to the state. The evils we have alluded to are in some degree inseparable from all possible systems of education which are capable of being put into practice, but they will be best avoided by placing the individual school under the control of a community composed merely of the number of families having children to be educated in it.

For ourselves, we adopt the democratic principle in its fullest extent; but we believe that federalism—we use the word in its etymological sense—is the method by which its beneficial working is best to be secured. The individual state, as well as the Union, should be a confederacy of distinct communities. Our idea of the true form of a republican government for this country is, first, that the few material interests common to all parts of the whole country should be confided to a general congress composed of delegates from all the States; secondly, that the class of interests under these, common to the largest extent of territory, should be confided to a state congress, composed of delegates from counties; thirdly, the next more general class of interests under these should be confided to a county government composed of delegates from several townships or wards; fourthly, the next most general class to a township or ward government composed of delegates from the several districts of the town or ward; fifthly, the remaining interests which may be subjected to governmental action should be confided to all the citizens of the district, which should always be of size sufficient to maintain a grammar school: This is nothing but the

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actual idea of our government, freed from its exceptions and anomalies, and would require no new division to be introduced. Our legislature, in this commonwealth, is composed of delegates from corporations or communities, and we hope the hand of innovation will never succeed in giving it a different basis. . . .

Now, to the smallest of these divisions, corresponding to our present school districts, among other matters, we would confide the whole subject—with the exception heretofore made—of common-school education. This exception related to the finances; but we would make even this exception as narrow as possible. The more exclusively the whole matter of the school is brought under the control of the families specially interested in it, the more efficient will the school be. If the town manage part of it and the state a part of it, the district will be very likely to be remiss in managing its part, and so in fact no part, in the end, will be well managed. This results from a common principle: where responsibility is divided, there is always a greater or less want of fidelity in its discharge. Wherever there is a power to be exercised, there should always be a concentration of it in as few hands as possible; and, to counterbalance the centralizing tendency of this, the community should be so divided into subcommunities, that the power should in fact affect but a small number, and matters should be so arranged that this small number should be able to obtain speedy redress, if wronged.

At any rate, experience proves that when the powers of the school district were greater, and the interference of the state and the township were less than now, the common school was altogether better than it is at present. In this view of the case, we regard the board of education as an unwise establishment. It is a measure designed to reduce yet lower the powers and responsibilities of school districts, to deprive them of their rights, and to bring the whole matter of education under the control of one central government. In the district, we manage the school for our own children, but the board of education have no children in the district school. They are removed to a great distance from it by the fewness of their number and the populousness of the community for which they act, and they can never take the deep interest of parents in each individual school and, therefore, must want that which has thus far given to the common school its charm and its efficiency. To confide our common schools to the board is like taking the children from their parents, and entrusting them to strangers. . . .

. . . Government is not in this country, and cannot be, the educator of the people. In education, as in religion, we must rely mainly on the voluntary system. If this be an evil, it is an evil inseparable from our form of government. Government here must be restricted to material interests and forbidden to concern itself with what belongs to the spiritual culture of the community. It has no right of control over our opinions: literary, moral, political, philosophical, or religious. Its province is to reflect, not to lead, nor to create the general will. It, therefore, must not be installed the educator of the people. . . .

The real educators of the young are the grownup generation. The rising generation will always receive as good, as thorough an education, as the actual generation is prepared to give, and no better. The great work, then, which needs to be done in order to advance education, is to qualify the actual generation for imparting a more complete and finished education to its successor, that is to say, educate not the young, but the grownup generation. This educating of the grownup generation is what we mean by the *education of the people*. Society at large must be regarded as a vast normal school in which the whole active, doing, and driving generation of the day are pupils qualifying themselves to educate the young.