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Liberal Parents, Radical Children/ Education in the United States: A Documentary History/ The Invisible Woman: Discrimination in the Academic Profession/ The New Negro On Campus/ The Divided Academy: Professors and Politics/ Soldiers and Students: A study of right- and left-wing radicals

by Richard J. Margolis

Paradigms Lost

Liberal Parents, Radical Children by Midge Decter. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 248 pages, $7.95.

One does not suffer Midge Decter lightly; one simply suffers. Her outrageous generalizations, her exasperating mannerisms, her raspy literary syntax are just a few of the many vexations that add to the reader's unhappiness. Somehow ("May God please tell us how it happened," she might say) Decter has achieved a style of sarcasm drained of irony and of mockery unleavened by a single grain of satirical yeast. Her determinedly calm and rational tone—a reasonableness of inflection that in no way relates to the news she brings us—suggests the concealment of an enormous rage. One therefore reads this book with an eye on the door, as it were, ready to flee the ultimate eruption, a volcano of Decterite vitriol.

Her anger, to vary the metaphor, is double-edged. Mainly it is directed against the bright-eyed youths of the sixties who, Decter insists, have become the idlers and slugabeds of the seventies. Apparently something has gone hideously wrong with these hopefuls: They have turned into perpetual adolescents.

How did this terrible thing happen? Faulty upbringing, says Decter—which explains why the other edge of her sword is aimed inward, at herself and at her contemporaries, all those well-meaning parents who performed so badly. "Why have you, the children, found it so hard to take your rightful place in the world?" she asks rather disingenuously. "Why have your parents' hopes for you come to seem so impossible of attainment?"

The answer, she implies, can be found in this book of "fictionalized sociology," containing "a series of portraits of significant types" drawn from the younger generation. "As it happens," she announces airily, "my purpose here is not to preach but to describe." But as it happens her descriptions are nothing if not sustained and sanctimonious preachments on such threadbare notions as the perils of permissiveness, the virtues of self-discipline, and the irresponsibility of young people.

Her choice of "significant types" turns out to be something less than a fair sampling of youth in the sixties. Stripped of their classy embellishments, these alleged paradigms can be seen as familiar tabloid clichés: The Dropout, The Pothead, The Sexual Revolutionist, and The Communard. (These are her labels, not mine.) Each of the four prototypes is given his/her own chapter, and we are asked to believe that in some important but unspecified way these are "true stories" about "real experiences." It is hard going. The characters are waxen, the plots are repetitive, the ideas are all predictable. Bad fiction and worse sociology, these portraits take the New Journalism—with its contempt for pedestrian facts and its worship of "creativity"—about as far as it can go. One more step and we're over the precipice.

Decter's four scenarios are more or less interchangeable. In the beginning, the Child shows great promise: "The one thing about which everyone agreed was that he was a boy of considerable gifts" (The Dropout). In the next scene, the Parents are shown idolizing the Child: "Seeing her at play...it was easy for them to fancy that she was no less than an embodiment of that far-off and legendary state of grace before the Fall" (The Pothead). Later, for reasons that remain murky, Child criticizes Parent: "...the young man was under the impression that he had not been able to reach his father, that his ideas had made no dent in that great thick wall of conventional piety behind which the old man had always kept himself hidden and protected" (The Communard). Finally, Child abandons Parents, but not their bankroll: "They thought [living away from home] would be a maturing experience for her, and approved of her desire to assume responsibility. A bank account was opened for her, with the sole proviso that should she find such living difficult or in any way undesirable, she not be proud and return home immediately" (The Pothead).

Now it must be conceded that these gloomy tales, lifeless and schematized as they are, do ring a faint gong. No doubt some of us in the sixties did go gaga with adulation over the pot-smoking, acid-dropping, fornicating, militant young; and no doubt, too, some of those young people in the seventies continue to play their narcissistic games. But surely Decter is aware that they are the exceptions, and that she speaks for comparatively few parents when she says, "The children are not, for some reason—may God please tell them what it is—in good shape."

Furthermore, in her eagerness to condemn a whole generation she has managed to overlook the seminal contribution that "radical children" made to both the civil rights and antiwar movements. Strange to say, not one of her "typical" youths goes south with Martin Luther King,

marches in Washington, pickets a draft board, sits in at a college, or even attends a rally for Eugene McCarthy. Some radicals!

Yet in assessing the role of young people during the sixties, Decter can find it within her heart to fault them, in Polonius-like fashion, for their priorities: "And above all, you seemed to find it difficult if not impossible to touch the world at just those tangents where its real work was being done and its real decisions being made." Well, where were the real decisions being made in those days, and where was the world's real work being done, if not in places like Washington, Berkeley, and Montgomery, Alabama? And who was in closer touch with reality—the young people who marched at the 1968 Democratic convention, or the Chicago police who clubbed and maced them? (Or Hubert Humphrey, for that matter, who the next day told a reporter, "In any case, I assure you those hippies are not from Chicago"?) Decter seems to be saying that many of the great disturbances of the sixties—the ones that had young people marching and shouting and bleeding and sometimes dying—were products of childish wrongheadedness (arising from parental permissiveness!) rather than the consequences of real and disastrous events occurring in a real and disastrous world.

In sum, then, Decter both provides us with many wrong answers about radical children in the sixties and fails to raise the right questions about those same radical children in the seventies. For example, why don't *they* have children? Is it because of their allegiance to ecology, women's lib, and the like, or is it something less modish and more dangerous, like alienation—a repudiation of parents, a negation of progeny?

In *Young Radicals* (1968) Kenneth Keniston characterized youthful anti-Vietnam protesters as "psychological adults but sociological adolescents": they "have not made the...commitment to occupation or to a lasting relationship with one other person that is said to be characteristic of adulthood." Could it be that now, nearly a decade later, these men and women still have not made the commitment, and that in ways deeper and more disturbing than any Decter might imagine, our radical children have surrendered their dreams? I pray that this, too, is a wrong question.

—*Richard J. Margolis*

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A Constant Clamor

Education in the United States: A Documentary History edited by Sol Cohen. New York: Random House, five volumes, 3,511 pages, $165.

The rationale for a five-volume (3,511-page) documentary history of education in the United States is its uniqueness. Other source material on the subject is, according to editor Sol Cohen, "limited in one respect or another." E.W. Knight's five-volume history, for instance, is limited to the South before 1860; Hofstadter's and Smith's documentary collection is restricted to higher education. The present opus is intended to be "better balanced...and more comprehensive."

Chronologically, the collection spans more than half a millenium—from 1392 to 1971, from Vergerius on "A Liberal Education" and Lionardo Bruni on "The Study of Literature" to Richard Nixon on "Higher Education" and Sidney P. Marland on the "National Institute of Education." The reason for the earliest date is the use of the first 300 pages to deal with the colonies' European heritage.

Ideologically, the compilation is catholic and ecumenical, stating the positions of conservatives and radicals, traditionalists and nontraditionalists, sectarians and universalists in the words of their proponents. Thus does Cotton Mather have his say and so does Benjamin Franklin in the eighteenth century; and in more recent times, so do Arthur Jensen and Kenneth Clark.

Geographically, materials are arranged to cover the country. In the earliest period, the South, the Middle Colonies, and New England are treated separately. In later years, the focus falls on those states organized under the Northwest Ordinance and the West.

The racial and ethnic interest is wide-ranging. For each of the three major divisions of the volumes—The Planting (1607-1789), The Shaping of American Education (1789-1895), The Transformation of American Education (1895-1973)—there are distinct subsections dealing with Negroes, Indians, Jews, and Chicanos. Likewise there is recurrent attention to women.

All levels of education are embraced—from early childhood and kindergarten (Piaget, Froebel, Felix Adler, Susan Blow) to the college and university (Wayland, Tappen, Charles Eliot, William James, Abraham Flexner, Hutchins, Nicholas Murray Butler). The types of materials are varied: learned disquisitions, excerpts from textbooks, legal documents, relevant fiction, autobiography, curricula, charters, advertisements. Some of the authors do not discuss education: Copernicus, Freud, Newton, Darwin. But they are included anyhow because their ideas revolutionized man's notion of self and universe and, hence, of what should be taught and how it should be taught.

Conceptually, the editor follows Bernard Bailyn's dictum (*Education in the Forming of American Society*) that a proper history should "see education in its elaborate, intricate involvement with the rest of society." While such a thesaurus is always in order, the present work is especially timely for American educators who, in the current crisis of frenzied soul searching, can use the experience of the past for guidance or solace.

Although our present troubles in academe seem of sudden and recent origin, starting with campus riots, followed by political reaction, and then by economic recession, the last section of this weighty history, entitled A Critical Reappraisal, strongly suggests that American education was running into difficulty long before the traumas of the late sixties and early seventies. As early as 1950, Albert Lynd was crying out against the "superprofessionals" and the "superpedagogues," who were far less interested in serving either the society or the children than in massaging their own bureaucratic egos.

In 1951, Frank Chodorov pointed to the conflict in Pasadena as evidence of "progressive" arrogance of professionals who acted as if "parents have no competence in the field of education and ought not to interfere with the experts." In 1952, the founder of progressive education, John Dewey, expressed his fears that