BANKRUPT EDUCATION: THE DECLINE OF LIBERAL EDUCATION IN CANADA
Peter C. Emberley and Waller R. Newell
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994
189 pages

VALUES EDUCATION AND TECHNOLOGY: THE IDEOLOGY OF DISPOSSESSION
Peter C. Emberley
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995
330 pages

In the last two years, Peter Emberley has written two major books on education: Bankrupt Education (co-authored with Waller Newell) and Values Education and Technology. In many ways the books are complementary: Bankrupt Education engages contemporary debates emerging in the last few decades while Values Education and Technology engages broad historical trends that date back to the Ancient Greeks. The two books are also written with a similar tone of engagement and subject to many of the same limitations.

Whatever the merit of the books, it is difficult to get past the way that the books make their respective points. One dominant rhetorical theme in both books is the image of a lost golden age of liberal education. The lost time, however, shifts depending on the context. Sometimes, the golden age is Ancient Greece, sometimes it is the Middle Ages (which comes to an end with Bacon’s “deconstruction” of the curriculum), sometimes it is the period before the 1960’s. But the ideal period is never explored in detail, perhaps because none of the times would, in fact, correspond to their image.

The idealized past allows for the easy identification of culprits and victims. Perhaps the most lamentable aspect of the two books is the confrontational rhetoric that pervades the discussion. Emberley and Newell are fighting a war over education, and they seem uninterested in offering their opponents anything but scorn. While Bankrupt Education, with its focus on contemporary issues, depends on labels such as "social engineer," "edocrats," and "ideologue," the danger in Values Education and Technology is with the "sophists," the "nihilists," and "deconstruction." Of course, if someone accepted these labels, the books would be convincing. But someone looking for a balanced argument or reasons to believe what is being offered has to search through the rhetoric.

The authors give no quarter, and are often content to simplify the world to make an effective point rather than become bogged down in details, ambiguities and granting their opponents even a small amount of reason. For instance, in Bankrupt Education there is an extended argument against political intervention in education. Their examples, primarily chosen from the last decade in Ontario (although they suggest their argument applies across Canada), criticize the people (politicians and ideologues) who approach education as a site for social engineering. For instance,

We contend that ideological enthusiasm and educational fashion, in opposition to the interests of parents and the experiences of teachers, are being permitted to dictate the methods of education (1994:36).

Frequently, the arguments rely on the popular support, the self-evidence, and the common sense of the conclusions the authors want to support. When they note how it is “No wonder parents feel that the school system has abandoned its responsibilities,” they make a forceful claim without offering supporting evidence or analysis. Which parents? What questions were they asked? When? What was meant by responsibility? The generalization may in part have resulted from the book being written in the aftermath of widespread protests in Ontario, but the battle lines they try to draw are much broader. The arguments follow rhetorical forms set down by Plato, arguing against the politicized present and against the anti-rational sophists. The politicians and the social engineers (which primarily refers to leftist intellectuals), are ideological, while the liberal democrats, the parents, and anyone in the political “centre” somehow escapes the label.

Another problematic theme in the two books is the persistent way that the authors use proper names as markers for particular arguments. This strategy ends up simplifying the thinkers that are discussed. For instance, Emberley’s reading of Nietzsche in Values Education and Technology as a proponent of values clarification would convince very few people familiar with Nietzsche’s work, while his image of Aristotle as the educator of openness and the good life would leave many wondering what Emberley would say about Aristotle’s very illiberal pronouncements concerning anyone outside of his ideal, whether slaves,
non-Greeks, or women. Of course, the simplification fits into the way that the thinkers from the western tradition are divided into two competing camps, but it also casts a shadow over the arguments, leading readers to engage the quality of the readings rather than the content.

The use of Aristotle in Values Education and Technology connects to the last troubling part of the argument: the periodic defense of the liberal tradition against charges of Eurocentrism. There is an evident western bias in the two works. Following the strategies of Voeglin and Arendt, modernity is a western creation, and the solutions to modernity are found in the philosophical traditions of Greece and Christianity (by which is meant Plato, Aristotle and St. Augustine) and in remembering our "Anglo-European intellectual and ethical roots." Other perspectives are either rejected out of hand or are simply absent. The authors’ protestations are clearly insufficient to counter the obvious European, English, and Christian biases in the book.

With these limitations in mind, both books offer some important insights into the value and purpose of education that are clearly relevant to a broad range of people. There are three themes that stand out.

The first theme begins with a discussion of the loss of morality in our culture. In the middle chapters of Value Education and Technology, Emberley points out that education has not abandoned ethics. Instead, "moral discourse" has been rejected in favour of "values discourse", which Emberley divides into three theories: "values clarification", "moral development", and "values analysis" (1995:94). The shift from moral to value discourses has significant implications for the role of ethics in education and in life in general. According to Emberley, values should not count as morality at all. They are attitudes, opinions, or psychological states that can be superficial, unquestioning, and falsely authentic. They do not engage the student in self-reflexion, and are not concerned with articulating the good life (which is the object of ethics). Values discourse (and technology) offer the illusion of power and self-control. In his critique of values discourse, Emberley uses Rousseau's Emile as an example of the power relations at play: Emile believes that he is free while at all times he is being manipulated by his teacher. In the same way, the teacher in values education is supposed to be a facilitator who does not directly engage students, but rather bends the discussion in appropriate ways.

One may wonder how the power relations in liberal education are different. Emberley does not directly answer this question, but he may respond with the second theme in the work: his support of authority and obedience in education. He argues that overt authority and obedience help create free individuals. This is plausible insofar as "true" freedom is articulated in terms of self-possession, which is closely tied to self-discipline (see 1995:25). To be free is to be self-controlled, and self-control is acquired through obedience to authority.

The third important theme revolves around the link that Emberley suggests between values education and technology. Emberley repeats relatively common critiques of technology as a dehumanizing and depersonalizing process that panders to our desires rather than forming us into better (liberal) human beings. Through technology, we have lost our connection to the world, first by our attempt to control things rather than live with them, and second by our increasing relation to electronic images abstracted from the world.

Education is not simply reactive; it plays an important role in preparing people for particular kinds of lives. The problem, which Emberley’s discussion of morality highlights, is whether this image of human life (and its associated ideals) is appropriate for human beings. In the closing chapters of Values Education and Technology, he argues that modern education does not provide students with a stable centre, a personal balance from which we can engage the world, and that value education is complicit in the way that we have lost the world and let technology take over our lives even while it convinces us that we are powerful.

At a very basic level, the argument revolves around the value of stability over change and of unity over fragmentation. Emberley recognizes this. He repeatedly shifts the discussion from particular educational issues to concerns for our relationship to knowledge, for our understanding of human agency, and ultimately for the "very structure of being" (1995:7). The rejection of authority connects to the denial of a rational order, which in turn connects to our flight from the world. And to wander is "the sin of Cain" (1994:93).

It is through the discussion of the nature of freedom that the power of a liberal perspective on education is evident. There are serious questions that ought to be raised concerning the way that education relates to morality, and the way that freedom has been equated with a feeling of power, often encouraged by our relationship to technology. However, the discussions in both books spend too much time attacking people rather than offering a clear vision. In this sense, the polemic gets in the way of the argument. It is unlikely that either book will change anyone's minds, although they both may well intensify the fury.

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