

WHY JOHNNY CAN'T WORK:

The Snobbery Factor

by Suzannah Lessard

Equality of Educational Opportunity, otherwise known as "The Coleman Report," certified its author, James S. Coleman, as "a good man" in the world of education. I was first introduced to the recently issued Second Coleman Report (officially *Youth: Transition to Adulthood**) by Jerome Karabel, a sociologist and teaching fellow at Harvard, in *The New York Times Book Review*. Judging from Karabel's review, Coleman has gravely endangered his certification. The thrust of this new document, the reviewer reports, is that the long-term incarceration of young people in educational institutions has created a youth culture which hinders adjustment to adult society and nurtures an irresponsible, immature mentality. According to Karabel, the Coleman panel's prescription for this problem is to get students out into the working world where they would experience the discipline imposed by production goals, learn self-management, and develop a sense

of responsibility in contrast to the present situation in which (here he quotes from Coleman), "excluded from the central institutions of our society," students develop an image of themselves as "outsiders" with no "stake in the existing system."

"How much," wrote Karabel, "would youth learn about self-management in the often bureaucratic contexts of American work places? It seems clear that what the Coleman panel really means by self-management is management of one's self for the purpose of *adjusting* to existing institutions." He goes on, "Despite well-intentioned talk of extending school-work alternation schemes to college preparatory students, the real consequence of more career education would be the development of a dual tracking system which would accentuate inequality in the schools. . . [producing] technically proficient but culturally impoverished automatons,

Suzannah Lessard is an editor of The Washington Monthly.

**Youth: Transition to Adulthood.* Report of the President's Science Advisory Committee, James S. Coleman, chairman, et al. Chicago University Press, \$8.50, \$1.95.

adept at their specialized tasks and suitably docile in the realm of politics. When combined with a proposal for a dual minimum wage, with young people in the 14 to 18 age range to be paid less than the prevailing standard, expanded career education on the job would provide a massive new pool of cheap labor vulnerable to exploitation. Were it to have tried, the Coleman panel could hardly have come up with a plan better tailored to the needs of the corporate economy." Having described the report as a "bold strategy to strike at the very roots of the youth culture," Karabel concluded, "One can only hope that despite it all they ["youth"] will be able to protect the integrity of their educational institutions and maintain and pursue their critical, albeit unsettling, perspectives on adult society."

After this build-up, the report itself seemed almost comically bland and sensible. The specific target of the report was not political discontent at all but the segregation by age of "youth" from each other within the school system, and from adults

outside it. Eighth graders, off in their own "junior high," don't come into contact with either first graders, or even seniors in high school, and their relationship to the few adults with whom they do have contact is essentially passive. They are, as the panel puts it, the receivers of nurture rather than the providers. This is contrasted to the structure of a summer camp, in which junior counselors, often as young as 14 years old, both enjoy the benefits of the camp and supervise the activities of the younger children, thus sharing the responsibility with the adults to whom they are themselves accountable, and *doing* something for children younger than themselves. The implicit conclusion is that this kind of experience prepares a young person for "real life" much better than the situation in which, totally subordinate to adults, yet free of any responsibility, a young person lives in an asylum-like atmosphere where he or she interacts only with equally unfettered-but-subordinate peers. Besides advocating a return to a school

system which throws all ages together, the report recommends that young people also be exposed to the adult world, and adult tasks, by going out and working in real jobs, where adults will expect them to produce at the same time they learn from the adults' greater experience. Very sensibly, the report points out that the drastic division between going to school and going to work has the bad effect of forcing teenagers who are impatient with school to irrevocably leave it behind (thus slotting them in a fixed position in life). It also unnaturally shelters those who choose higher education from the chance to *do* as well as learn, and postpones exposure to "the real world," often until they are late into their twenties.

The splicing of job programs into high school and college is not the only suggestion the report makes to remedy this situation. It also cites the heavy demand for "continuing education" (in which learning is spliced into a working life instead of vice versa) and another possibility, "recurrent education," in which a person would alternate between school and work. The report notes that a limited pattern of recurrent education has already begun to evolve in this country as many college students leave after one or two years to work and then return to school; often with the formal agreement of the school. This still confines education to a fairly young age-group, however. Ideally people should be able to return to school at intervals throughout their lives to deepen their knowledge in their given field, or to broaden their knowledge beyond it, or simply to refuel, to draw back from the unrelenting, draining career rat-race.

'I Won't Grow Up'

The targets—institutionalized age segregation and the separation between work and learning—are very clearly drawn in the report, but the reasons for the attack—the disadvantages of the status quo, the advantages

which would be gained by reform—are extremely vague. This vagueness is the soft spot which drew Karabel's fire. All the report really tells us is that if they had jobs at an early age, "youth" would learn how to manage money or, more obscurely, "to manage themselves," and would learn to give instead of only taking. Otherwise the advantages of reform are vague, amounting, in the end, to a never-released outburst pent up in the meticulous, deadpan prose: "THEY WOULD GROW UP." Although he tries to write about it in the value-free social-scientist style, it is pretty clear that Coleman communicates what seems to be an arbitrary dislike of what he calls the youth culture, describing it as the successor to black leather jacket groups of the fifties (who differed from latter day "rebels" chiefly in that they did not enjoy the esteem of the majority of "youths") and, contradictorily, as both inward-looking (that is, interested only in each other) and abnormally concerned for the underdog at the expense of the establishment. We were told in the introduction to the report that the problem was a lack of exposure to the real world and real work, but in Coleman's essay on the youth culture, the fact that young people have produced their own newspapers, clothes manufacturers, and entertainment is cited as an example of "inward-lookingness." It would seem that "the youth culture," whatever that is, cannot win with Coleman.

There is an all-too-familiar sense of pique, of "grown-up" authority, over-reacting to the skepticism of the young, even of the mentality which would enjoy forcing a long-haired fellow into the barber chair and giving him a crew-cut. It was, perhaps, this musty attitude which first triggered Karabel's suspicions, and indeed, it does not strain logic to conclude that Coleman is seeking to reorganize the structure so that the "irresponsible" positions of objection to American foreign policy, and reevaluation of middle-class values by young people

will be far less likely to develop. At least one can say that in treating the aspect of dissent from the establishment in the "youth culture" largely as an undesirable social phenomenon, Coleman gives only the most cursory attention to the values which generated much of it.

Up the Corporate Sandbox

Unfortunately, once one's suspicions are aroused that Coleman's real purpose is to stamp out political dissent by slipping young people into the system at an early age, the report only plays to those suspicions, finally outdoing itself with the recommendation not only that schools join hands with the business establishment in the education of the young, but that classrooms be moved right into the factory and office buildings, that day care centers and gathering places for the old also be incorporated into the working place, and that a joyous co-mingling of all ages working, learning, and playing under the corporate roof becomes the central institution of our lives. The picture of Mom and Dad, Junior, Baby, and Grandpa all happily leaving home every morning for General Motors is (fortunately) more hilarious than probable, a final vision which is likely to discredit the report which runs before it, the grains of wisdom along with the sour must.

Yet, though the report provokes suspicions, it remains that the targets alone are made clear and the reason for the attack is left vague—in fact, is full of contradictions. This, I think, is not because the panel is muffling a right-wing conspiracy but because the report is a political document in the sense that its authors are attempting to put over their ideas without antagonizing either the progressive education types or the conservatives. By implying that the proposal for job experience is a way to root out hippies, the panel could hope to gain the ear of the right. The problem with the left would be that "career

education" is associated with blocking the poor from both spiritual fulfillment (through exposure to the humanities) and the ladder of upward mobility by corralling them into "dead-end" vocational slots. This is precisely how Karabel reacted, but the fact that he tagged the report as discriminatory doesn't mean that the panel didn't try to tailor its recommendations for approval from Harvard. The way in which the panel did this, and the way in which Karabel reacted, in spite of their efforts, reveals a very deep American attitude towards both work and education.

Very possibly in an effort to head off Karabel's reaction, the panel takes great pains to emphasize that the purpose of splicing a work life into a learning life is not because there is something innately valuable in the work itself, but because the experience would be a kind of lesson in life, a sobering exposure to reality to temper the heady rarefied atmosphere of the classroom. It is not for the purpose of learning a skill, we are told emphatically, but for the development of concentration on one thing over a long period; not for the value of producing something, but for the experience of the discipline imposed by the demands of production. The advantage for future members of the elite, they soothingly tell the liberals, will be to ease the transition from dependent youth in the educational greenhouse to adult responsibility. The advantage for the future blue-collar worker—here it gets a little

Take Advantage of Us

Take Advantage of
The Washington Monthly's
Special Christmas Gift Offer
See the Inside Back Cover
For Details

vague—will be to make leaving school for work possible without forever closing off the options of following a higher calling, since the going to work at an early age would be institutionalized rather than called “dropping out of high school.” An aside to the right: by participating in the real world, young people will begin to feel they have a stake in the system and dissenting tendencies will be thwarted. An example of contradiction brought about by dual courtship: how is a future rebel of the elite class going to be made to feel he has a stake in the system by working in the kinds of jobs which can be done by teenagers? And is a young autoworker of the “new breed” going to be any less likely to object to working conditions when he is employed as an adult fulltime, if he had a spell in the factory at age 14?

Looking Down on Real Work

Discipline, powers of concentration, exposure to the everyday world, all these are indeed valuable, but in the scrupulous elimination of the objective of producing something, from the stated purpose of the proposal, the panel reinforces a blindness which plagues much of our national self-analysis: the focus on process, the overlooking of goals. Coleman advocates doing for doing's sake, for the by-products of doing for the doer, not for the sake of what gets done, and in this he and Karabel, ostensibly on opposite sides of the debate, share a kinship. Despite the panel's careful insistence that the process is the purpose, Karabel jumps on them and says, No, you are really talking about training people for lifetime jobs, about “career education.” Thus he is in effect joining forces with that thrust in the report which disavows any particular interest in learning a skill, invoking instead a vague notion of personal development, the darling concept of the liberals. Career education to Karabel means the cutting short of potential,

the routing of less advantaged students into lower-class slots more quickly than they are at present. Technical proficiency, to him, is the virtue of “automatons,” a mind-killer which engenders political docility. For Coleman, when he is appealing to the right, career education is a spirit-breaker. When he is appealing to Karabel, it has nothing to do with technical proficiency but only with the subjective effect upon the doer. Successful students in Coleman's program would report back to their mentors that they had learned to manage their own money, concentrate on a task for eight hours a day, day after day, and fulfill a responsibility, in the sense of achieving the approval of their employer. It would not be pertinent that they had made six solid tables, or had harvested a hundred bushels of potatoes, or had, by applying rudimentary medical and psychological knowledge, made the lives of ten physically distressed and lonely old people more enjoyable. Nor would it be pertinent if they had failed in these tasks, or, after a spell in the bureaucratic context Karabel so rightly attacks, had produced nothing at all.

In lashing out at the very idea of career education, even when it has been so carefully qualified as to eliminate any notion that actual accomplishment has anything to do with it, Karabel expresses a disdain for technical skill which is widely held in the liberal establishment. My hunch is that Coleman knows full well that the state of training for non-elite but essential skills in this country is abysmal. Much of it has been left to swindlers who perceive a ripe opportunity in the hundreds of thousands of people who desperately want to acquire a marketable skill and are willing to put down their last penny for training which will either send them into a job unequipped to handle it, or, more likely, as unhireable as they were before. (See Peter Cowen's article on trade schools, page 29.) I think Coleman also knows that the

liberal education establishment can probably effectively sabotage any program they dislike, that career education is, in that world, a dirty word, and that respect for the "lower" skills generally is practically nonexistent, connoting a thwarting of potential. So he tried to serve what he knew to be the very worthy cause of career education by putting it across as something else, by describing it chiefly as a way to give future professors of philosophy a glimpse of reality before they reach the ripe old age of 25.

The Beacon in the Fog

This is, of course, only a theory: perhaps the skewed, evasive aspects of the report are simply the result of compromises between the members of the panel, or perhaps the contradictions and evasions are simply the expression of ambivalences unanimously felt by the panel. The theory that the authors were trying to court different factions at the same time nevertheless fits the report, which is like a landscape with two strong beacons on it—age segregation is wrong, and exposure of young people to real work is needed—and then a host of obscure signals, apparently sent out for different sets of eyes (catchwords like "adjustment to the system" for the right, "personal development" for the left) and together amounting to a diffused set of semi-recommendations and expressions of philosophy. And then there is a huge, gaping hole in the picture, for while the report is addressing itself to on-the-job training as an extension of educational opportunities, it not only ignores the desperate need for such training—in the practical sense of acquiring a skill so you can get a job and do it well—but swears up and down that this is not the goal.

Thus having trashed the one most compelling reason for instituting such a program, the panel sets forth a series of worthy, but vague and subsidiary, reasons for why we should institute

this massive, quite radical reform. It is as though they had built a bridge and left out the piers and pylons. They have hung in the air the gossamer cables and twinkling lights of words such as "transition," "maturity," and "self-management," spun together with the warm sense of a humanitarian (and at the same time disciplinarian) process which will elicit the best in human beings, and left them there, ghostly apparitions with no support. Given this peculiar construction, one can hardly blame Karabel for saying the piers and pylons are merely hidden in the fog, and that the real goal of the program is job-oriented career education.

My theory also fits the situation in the intellectual (and political) world which the panel knew they would have to contend with, and that situation is the die-hard factionalism which causes people often to reject ideas out of hand because the shibboleths are not right. I am not talking about Jerome Karabel here, for I know nothing of his history, and he may well be one of the few truly independent thinkers in the country. I'm speaking rather of a general pattern of behavior which the authors of the Coleman Report knew might either kill or launch the ideas in their report. However sincerely questioning, writers and intellectuals have an investment in the labels attached to them, just as surely as liberal congressmen have an investment in their image and risk a serious erosion of support if they vote against bills which, however dubious, have been tagged liberal. In journalism, if James J. Kilpatrick, who has risen to fame as a "respectable" conservative, began advocating things like higher welfare payments, he would risk his television spot. Gloria Steinem would risk her position as a spokeswoman if she began qualifying those principles with which she has come to be identified. (What ever happened to Betty Friedan?)

The same kind of connection between success and identifying labels exists in the more specialized and

intellectual fields as well. One of the chief differences, however, between politicians and intellectuals (or writers) on this score is that many politicians are perfectly capable of saying in private that they voted a certain way because they otherwise would have tarnished their image, thus at least keeping intact their own real beliefs. Intellectuals, on the other hand, can't bear the idea of such duality, and have to believe that they believe what they say they believe, even if the nagging feeling that they will blow their marketable identity is definitely influencing their pronouncements. Thus there is a temptation for someone eager to gain their support for an idea to mask it in passwords which conform to that identity and make the idea sound safe, rather than putting the idea forward in its strongest, clearest form. And thus those who seek to convince groups with opposing identities will try to concoct masterful blends of passwords, hoping each faction will only hear the Valentine messages meant for it.

Trying to Have It Both Ways

This is what I think the Coleman panel was up to—the trick of getting up to the altar with two brides without letting either know the other is there until the ceremony is over. Like the trick itself, the factional deafness, which makes this kind of guile necessary, is no doubt as old as human nature. And the art of manipulating the deafness has been well-established since the beginning of this country. John Marshall, afraid of impeachment, regularly threw decisions to one side and theory to the other, thus keeping his position of influence as Chief Justice. In our own time Patrick Moynihan has been the grand master (albeit not always successful) of conning both liberals and conservatives into supporting his ideas.

There are serious dangers in this kind of politicking with ideas, how-

ever. First, when we cease to say what we mean, we cease, often, to say anything at all. We cease to speak to each other. Secondly, when this kind of campaign is successful, the idea is likely to remain the prisoner of the strategy that launched it. Coleman had a great deal of credibility to draw on, and he stood a fair chance of overcoming factional deafness and reaching both sides with a forceful, candid report. But as it stands, by trying to gull both sides into thinking his recommendations are something other than they really are, he has created a proposal which is gutted of its most compelling value, and if executed in the form of a real program, would be as confusing and contradictory as the strategically constructed report.

The problem and the particular loss in the case of the Second Coleman Report points toward a much larger problem and a much greater loss. We build bridges of ideal “processes” in the air, while, in a literal sense, the real bridges—or at least the highways—are falling down. “Quality” is a nostalgia word. “Skill” conjures up medieval craftsmen. And as the collapsing economy goes on disgorging inferior, over-priced goods, we look at the process, and wonder what went wrong. Many things have gone wrong but one of them is that we have forgotten the value of doing things well at all levels. So what we produce has little value. Meanwhile, having a low regard for skill, we leave to hucksters the business of training people to do many of the essential jobs. Those short-changed students, meanwhile, are inevitably not trained at all, and kept outside the glorious process, they eke out marginal lives on welfare checks. We tell them we cannot make good training readily available to them because helping them acquire a skill would be to block them from the escalator of upward mobility and self-fulfillment. Since stockbrokers also have vast amounts of free time now, maybe the two groups will get to chatting. ■

WHY JOHNNY CAN'T WORK:

The Robbery Factor

by Peter Cowen

The indifference of our public schools to training people for jobs has left the field largely to educational hustlers. One example is ITT Tech, the largest private vocational school in Massachusetts, with some 1,200 students. Housed in a two-story cinderblock building with a brick facade, it is just up the street from Boston University on a bleak commercial boulevard split by trolley tracks and lined with appliance and auto accessory stores, bars, used car dealers, and fried chicken concessions. Inside ITT Tech, hanging on the yellow cinderblock walls, are facsimiles of the Bill of Rights, U. S. Constitution, and Declaration of Independence, the latter partially obscured by a cigarette machine. To the right of the entrance lies a network of flimsy, five-foot-high partitioned cubicles. Inside them the school's salesmen—eschewing commercialism, they call themselves “representatives”—ply potential enrollees with their pitches.

Murmurs escape from the cubicles, subdued, low-key dialogues that lend an aura of dignity to the transactions underway within. Seated in folding chairs outside the cubicles, are half a dozen young men dressed in working clothes, waiting to be interviewed.

Peter Cowen is a reporter for The Boston Globe. This article was based on research by a Globe investigative team that included Gerard O'Neill, Stephen Kurkjian, and Ellen Zack.

Aspirants for future jobs in fields such as drafting, refrigeration repairing, or electronics, they are prospective students who probably thought it futile to apply at even the less exclusive state colleges. What they hear in the cubicles is known only to them and their salesmen, and if the youths claim months later, as many do, that they were deceived about ITT Tech, they will most likely be informed by school and state officials that the words on their contracts, not verbal statements, govern the school's responsibilities to them.

Curiosity about what ITT Tech salesmen tell prospects in private impelled a 29-year-old writer to pose as a potential student and invite a salesman to his unimposing three-room suburban apartment for a discussion of the school's \$2,000 mechanical drafting course. An hour early, George Williams appeared at the door. He was a middle-aged man of medium build, with wavy, graying hair swept back from a receding hairline.

Williams began with an admonition about the necessity of a quick decision about applying: “I could come in with your enrollment tonight, and they could tell me, ‘OK, George, now don't take any more.’” This theme was repeated throughout the interview. But the delivery was surprisingly casual. His air of detachment, combined with his warnings about how quickly classes were filling, was more effective than any brow-