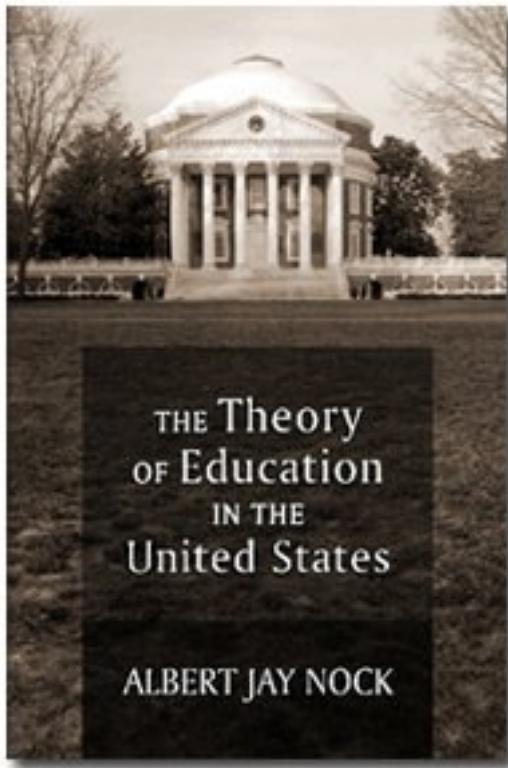


Theory of Education in the United States



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It is hard to say what is most notable about this book published first in 1931:

1. Albert Jay Nock's incredible disquisition on the real meaning of education and its role in a free society.
2. That these lectures were given at a university as part of a prestigious Page-Barbour lecture series.

3. That they were delivered at a "public ivy" school: the University of Virginia.

There is no way such a lecture series could appear on a campus of this sort today. For in these lectures, Nock goes to the heart of the matter of what is wrong with the structure of education in the United States: the policy, imposed by government, of universal admissions on the theory that everyone is equally educable.

The book is made up of 14 lectures, each one building on the other. He begins with an understanding of what it means to be an educated person. He discusses the dissatisfaction of nearly everyone that US schools are not in fact turning out educated people. He turns to reform movements in education and provides a shocking round up of their history (keep in mind that this is 1931). He then spells out the difference between training and education and how Americans have completely overlooked the difference in the course of seeking economic and social uplift for everyone.

"Our system is based upon the assumption, popularly regarded as implicit in the doctrine of equality, that everybody is educable. This has been taken without question from the beginning; it is taken without question now. The whole structure of our system, the entire arrangement of its mechanics, testifies to this. Even our truant laws testify to it, for they are constructed with exclusive reference to school-age, not to school-ability.

"When we attempt to run this assumption back to the philosophical doctrine of equality, we cannot do it; it is not there, nothing like it is there. The philosophical doctrine of equality gives no more ground for the assumption that all men are educable than it does for the assumption that all men are six feet tall. We see at once, then, that it is not the philosophical doctrine of equality, but an utterly untenable popular perversion of it, that we find at the basis of our educational system."

He goes further to attack the idea that literacy alone is capable of preserving freedom and civilization. He blasts the tendency to think that education is good so long as it encompasses the largest possible group ("no child left behind"). He says that in fact a good educational institution should have very few students.

The range of radical thought here is nothing short of shocking, from his claim that very few should be in college to the point that vastly more people are tenured as professors than there should be (again, 1931).

Three factors have changed since he wrote. First, the practice of universal education has expanded beyond a point which Nock himself could have imagined. Second, the classical ideal of education has become all but entirely unknown. Third, the economy has ever less use for the skills that the university teaches, so it has once again fallen back to private institutions to actually prepare people for a productive life.

In this case, Nock is more relevant than ever before. But beware: only read this incredible book (which was shocking in 1931) if you are prepared to completely rethink the basis of modern education.

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