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You know you are getting old when the candles cost more than the cake - so they say. But I suppose nothing makes one feel more old, even if you're not, than when an old and discredited idea is impressed on you as a fresh insight. One experiences a sense of mental paralysis at the thought of wading through all the arguments again and then run the risk of your silence being accepted as consent.

Take for example, the reaction of the Minister of Education and Development Aid, Dr Gerrit Viljoen, to offers emanating from Britain to educate large numbers of black people from South Africa in that country. Dr Viljoen says "The best preparation for becoming useful citizens in adult life was most effectively achieved by education in South Africa, for South Africans." He added, "ample opportunities existed in South Africa for the education and training of blacks to the highest academic and professional levels."

I don't wish to dwell on all the familiar problems of the present crisis in black education - the vast inequalities in quantity, quality and accessibility to facilities and resources between black and white. Nor on the merits or lack of them in the government's attempt to do something about these problems. These are in any event, issues which will rage on in debates for quite a while yet.

Let us consider the significance of the idea that education is there to make you "a useful citizen of society".

I think not only Dr viljoen believes this, but also those good people from Britain who wish to educate large numbers of South African blacks in their country so that they can be more "useful citizens" in our country. Obviously there is a sense in which education can teach one certain fundamental skills which would make one perform more effectively in any industrial society. The level of one's education can almost be tested by the transferability

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of one's skills - thus South African dentists, doctors, accountants etc. apparently find it quite easy to get jobs in other countries like Australia and Canada. But, I do not believe that is what is meant by either Dr Viljoen or those concerned Britons when they talk about education making someone a "useful citizen in society". Presumably once those blacks from South Africa have been educated in Britain, they are to return to South Africa and be useful citizens here, and similarly when Dr Viljoen says they can be trained to the highest academic and professional levels here in South Africa, then it is also here where he believes they can be most useful.

The assumption is uncritically made that "education" integrates one into "society", it teaches one how to achieve what is regarded as desirable by "society" and meshes one into the economic opportunities and needs of "society". "Society" is seen as a benign disembodied agent that uses education to harmonize the needs of the individual with the demands of "society". This is so much romantic twaddle. Education can be subversive, indoctrinating, disintegrating, conflict prone and even make one an absolutely "useless" member of society. Even in so-called industrially homogeneous societies (like Britain for example), education does not have the uncomplicated integrating and socializing function which some would assume. The challenge of education in divided and unequal societies is precisely to see it does not become a divisive, disintegrating and "useless making" force.

Dr K Hartshorne, the well known educationist, recently calculated that for every 100 black children that went to school in 1973, 10 would get to matric, 4 would pass and only 1 would get university exemption.

Research further showed that those who "drop out" become demoralized and hostile and are at an extreme competitive disadvantage in the job market, whereas those few who make it are extremely politicized and antagonistic to the very educational system in which they succeeded. Educational "reform" under these circumstances, i.e. of simply upgrading the system that exists, will have the paradoxical effect of increasing the number of people who will politically reject the very system they have come through. What this has to do with becoming "useful" and "integrated" into society, beats me.

Whatever else those who demand People's Education in reaction to DET education from Dr Viljoen are saying, they are clearly making the point that they have no intention of becoming "useful citizens" in an apartheid society. There is some truth in the argument that "some education is better than no education at all" and that the schools' boycott is swelling the ranks of the unskilled and illiterate. But what is a far more serious symptom of the disintegrating effect of black education in the South African society, is that some of the most able who have come through it are turning to others who have not and saying, "It is not worth it". Surely this fact should seriously concentrate the minds of people like Dr Viljoen. Should he rather not talk to these people to establish what kind of society they would like to be useful in, than simply plough on making them "useful citizens" in the society he and his government is determined to give them? Seems like a good way to begin talking about the education for the future.