ARNOLD TOYNBEE, the best-known historian in the world today, has written this article exclusively for alumni magazines, applying his challenge-and-response theory of history to the future of America. He theorizes that progress and growth occur when response to human or environmental challenge is successful, and part of the success is always due to leadership by a creative minority.

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*Has America Neglected Her Creative Minority?*

By ARNOLD TOYNBEE

America has been made the great country that she is by a series of creative minorities; the first settlers on the Atlantic seaboard, the founding fathers of the Republic, the pioneers who won the West. These successive sets of creative leaders differed, of course, very greatly in their backgrounds, outlooks, activities, and achievements; but they had one important quality in common: all of them were aristocrats.

They were aristocrats in virtue of their creative power, and not by any privilege of inheritance, though some of the founding fathers were aristocrats in conventional sense as well. Others among them, however, were middle-class professional men, and Franklin, who was the outstanding genius in this goodly company, was a self-made man. The truth is that the founding fathers’ social origin is something of secondary importance. The common quality that distinguished them all and brought each of them to the front was their power of creative leadership.

In any human society at any time and place and at any stage of cultural development, there is presumably the same average percentage of potentially creative spirits. The question is always: Will this potentiality take effect? Whether a potentially creative minority is going to become an effectively creative one is an open question.

The answer will depend on whether the minority is sufficiently in tune with the contemporary majority, and the majority with the minority, to establish understanding, confidence, and cooperation between them. The potential leaders cannot give a lead unless the rest of society is ready to follow it. Prophets who have been “without honour in their own country” because they have been “before their time” are no less well-known figures in history than prophets who have received a response that has made the fortune of their mission.

This means that effective acts of creation are the work of two parties, not just one. If the people have no vision, the prophet’s genius, through no fault of the prophet’s own, will be as barren as the talent that was wrapped in a napkin and buried in the earth. This means, in turn, that the people, as well as the prophet, have a responsible...
NEGLECT OF THE CREATIVE MINORITY

"the able child fares still worse in America than he does in Britain"

part to play. If it is incumbent on the prophet to deliver his message, it is no less
incumbent on the people not to turn a deaf ear. It is even more incumbent upon them
not to make the spiritual climate of their society so adverse to creativity that the life
will have been crushed out of the prophet's potential message before he has had a
chance of delivering it.

To give a fair chance to potential creativity is a matter of life and death
for any society. This is all-important, because the outstanding creative ability of a
fairly small percentage of the population is mankind's ultimate capital asset, and the
only one with which Man has been endowed. The Creator has withheld from Man
the shark's teeth, the bird's wings, the elephant's trunk, and the hound's or horse's
racing feet. The creative power planted in a minority of mankind has to do duty for all
the marvelous physical assets that are built into every specimen of Man's non-human
fellow creatures. If society fails to make the most of this one human asset, or if, worse
still, it perversely sets itself to stifle it, Man is throwing away his birthright of being
the lord of creation and is condemning himself to be, instead, the least effective species
on the face of this planet.

Whether potential creative ability is to take effect or not in a particular society is a
question that will be determined by the character of that society's institutions, atti-
tudes, and ideals. Potential creative ability can be stifled, stunted, and swultified by
the prevalence in society of adverse attitudes of mind and habits of behavior. What treat-
ment is creative ability receiving in our Western World, particularly in America?

There are two present-day adverse forces that are conspicuously deadly to creativity.
One of these is a wrong-headed conception of the function of democracy. The other is
an excessive anxiety to conserve vested interests, especially the vested interest in ac-
quired wealth.

What is the proper function of democracy? True democracy stands for giving an
equal opportunity to individuals for developing their unequal capacities. In a
democratic society which does give every individual his fair chance, it is obviously
the outstandingly able individual's moral
duty to make a return to society by using
his unfettered ability in a public-spirited way and not just for selfish personal pur-
poses. But society, on its side, has a moral
duty to ensure that the individual's po-
tentiality is given free play. If, on the
contrary, society sets itself to neutralize
outstanding ability, it will have failed in
its duty to its members, and it will bring
upon itself a retribution for which it will
have only itself to blame. This is why the
difference between a right and a wrong-
headed interpretation of the requirements
democracy is a matter of crucial impor-
tance in the decision of a society's destiny.

There is at least one current notion about
democracy that is wrong-headed to the
point of being disastrously perverse. This perversive notion is that to have been born
with an exceptionally large endowment of
innate ability is tantamount to having com-
mitted a large pre-natal offense against so-
ciety. It is looked upon as being an of-
fense because, according to this wrong-
headed view of democracy, inequalities of
any and every kind are undemocratic. The
gifted child is an offender, as well as the
unscrupulous adult who had made a for-
tune at his neighbors' expense by taking
some morally illegitimate economic advan-
tage of them. All offenders, of every kind,
against democracy, must be put down in-
discriminately according to this misguided
perversion of the true democratic faith.

There have been symptoms of this un-
fortunate attitude in the policy pursued by
some of the local educational authorities in
Britain since the Second World War. From
their ultra-egalitarian point of view, the
clever child is looked askance at as a kind of
capitalist. His offense seems the more he-
inous because of its precocity, and the fact
that the child's capital asset is his God-
given ability and not any inherited or ac-
quired hoard of material goods, is not
counted to him for righteousness. He pos-
sesses an advantage over his fellows, and
this is enough to condemn him, without re-
gard to the nature of the advantage that is
in question.

It ought to be easier for American educa-
tional authorities to avoid making this in-
tellectual and moral mistake, since in
America capitalists are not disapproved of.
If the child were a literal grown-up capital-
ist, taking advantage of an economic pull
to beggar his neighbour, he would not only
be tolerated but would probably also be ad-
mired, and public opinion would be reluct-
ant to empower the authorities to curb his
activities. Unfortunately for the able Amer-
ican child, "egg-head" is as damning a
word in America as "capitalist" is in the
British welfare state; and I suspect that the
able child fares perhaps still worse in Amer-
ica than he does in Britain.

If the educational policy of the English-
speaking countries does persist in this
course, our prospects will be unpromising.
The clever child is apt to be unpopular with
his contemporaries anyway. His presence
among them raises the sights for the stan-
ard of endeavour and achievement. This
is, of course, one of the many useful services
that the outstandingly able individual per-
forms for his society at every stage of his
career; but its usefulness will not appease
the natural resentment of his dullest or
lazier neighbours. Insofar as the public au-
thorities intervene between the outstanding
minority and the run-of-the-mill majority
at the school age, they ought to make it
their concern to protect the able child, not
to penalize him. He is entitled to protec-
tion as a matter of sheer social justice; and
to do him justice happens to be also in the
public interest, because his ability is a pub-
lic asset for the community as well as a
private one for the child himself. Public au-
thorities are committing a two-fold breach
of their public duty if, instead of fostering
ability, they deliberately discourage it.

In a child, ability can be discouraged eas-
ily; for children are even more sensitive
to hostile public opinion than adults are,
and are even readier to purchase, at almost
any price, the toleration that is an egalitar-
ian-minded society's alluring reward for
spiritless conformity. The price, how-
ever, is likely to be a prohibitively high one,
not only for the frustrated individual him-
self, but for his step-motherly society. So-
ciety will have put it in danger, not just of
throwing away a precious asset, but of sud-
dling itself dif with a formidable liability.
When creative ability is thwarted, it will not
be extinguished; it is more likely to be
given an anti-social turn. The frustrated
able child is likely to grow up with a con-
scious or unconscious resentment against
the society that has done him an irreparable
injustice, and his repressed ability may be
diverted from creation to retaliation. If and
when this happens, it is likely to be a
tragedy for the frustrated individual and
for the repressive society alike. And it will
have been the society, not the individual,
that has been to blame for this obstruction of God's or Nature's purpose.

This educational tragedy is an unnecessary one. It is shown to be unnecessary by the example of countries in whose educational system outstanding ability is honored, encouraged, and aided. This roll of honour includes countries with the most diverse social and cultural traditions. Scotland, Germany, and Confucian China all stand high on the list. I should guess that Communist China has remained true to pre-Communist Chinese tradition in this all-important point. I should also guess that Communist Russia has maintained those high Continental European standards of education that pre-Communist Russia acquired from Germany and France after Peter the Great had opened Russia's doors to an influx of Western civilization.

A contemporary instance of enthusiasm for giving ability its chance is presented by present-day Indonesia. Here is a relatively poor and ill-equipped country that is making heroic efforts to develop education. This spirit will put to shame a visitor to Indonesia from most English-speaking countries except, perhaps, Scotland. This shame ought to inspire at least as good a use of our far greater educational facilities.

If a misguided egalitarianism is one of the present-day menaces in most English-speaking countries to the fostering of creative ability, another menace to this is a benighted conservatism. Creation is a distasteful ability, another menace to this is a speaking country to the fostering of creativity. The present-day menaces in most English-speaking countries are a destructive effect of these.

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The Tokugawa regime in Japan might possibly have saved itself by mending its ways in good time if it had ever heard of King Canute's ocular demonstration of the impossibility of stopping the tide by uttering a word of command. In present-day America the story is familiar, and it would profit her now to take it to heart.

In present-day America, so it looks to me, the affluent majority is striving desperately to arrest the irresistible tide of change. It is attempting this impossible task because it is bent on conserving the social and economic system under which this comfortable influence has been acquired. With this unattainable aim in view, American public opinion is putting an enormously high premium on social conformity; and this attempt to standardize people's behavior in adult life is as discouraging to creative ability and initiative as the educational policy of egalitarianism in childhood.

Egalitarianism and conservatism work together against creativity, and, in combination, they mount up to a formidable repressive force. Among American critics of the present-day American way of life, it is commonplace nowadays to lament that the conventionally approved career for an American born into the affluent majority of the American people is to make money as the employee of a business corporation within the rigid framework of the existing social and economic order. This dismal picture has been painted so brilliantly by American hands that a foreign observer has nothing to add to it.

The foreign observer will, however, join the chorus of American critics in testifying that this is not the kind of attitude and ideal that America needs in her present crisis. If this new concept of Americanism were the true one, the pioneers, the founding fathers, and the original settlers would all deserve to be prosecuted and condemned posthumously by the Congressional committee on un-American activities.

The alternative possibility is that the new concept stands condemned in the light of the historic one; and this is surely the truth. America rose to greatness as a revolutionary community, following the lead of creative leaders who welcomed and initiated timely and constructive changes, instead of wincing at the prospect of them. In the course of not quite two centuries, the American Revolution has become world-wide. The shot fired in April, 1775, has been "heard around the world" with a vengeance. It has waked up the whole human race. The Revolution is proceeding on a world-wide scale today, and a revolutionary world-leadership is what is now needed.

It is ironic and tragic that, in an age in which the whole world has come to be inspired by the original and authentic spirit of Americanism, America herself should have turned her back on this, and should have become the arch-conservative power in the world after having made history as the arch-revolutionary one.

What America surely needs now is a return to those original ideals that have been the sources of her greatness. The ideals of "the organization man" would have been abhorrent to the original settlers, the founding fathers, and the pioneers alike. The economic goal proposed in the Virginia Declaration of Rights is not "affluence"; it is "frugality." The pioneers were not primarily concerned with money-making; if they had been, they could never have achieved what they did. America's need, and the world's need, today, is a new burst of American pioneering, and this time not just within the confines of a single continent but all around the globe.

America's manifest destiny in the next chapter of her history is to help the indigent majority of mankind to struggle upwards towards a better life than it has ever dreamed of in the past. The spirit that is needed for embarking on this mission is the spirit of the nineteenth-century American Christian missionaries. If this spirit is to prevail, America must treasure and foster all the creative ability she has in her.