Chapter 4

Educational Sustainability and the Obsolete Man

Man and the expanding domain of nature

With this sketch of the fundamental problems of social thought nearly behind us, let us press on and apply our theory more fully to the question of educational sustainability. What has become obvious to this point is that man as human cannot survive the modern liberation of material growth, the expanding domain of Nature. The reason for this becomes obvious after working out the institutional logic of the technical model of education and its productive activities. The technical model of production simply denies to human beings the necessary qualities, attributes, and purposes that make men and women human. If man per chance physically survives the institutional environment under technical growth, it will be in material form, it will not be surviving as man *qua* human. He will continue to exist by becoming something else, something less than human—a shadow of what he was intended to be, an obsolete figure in the drone of numbers percolating among central planners. Yet the institution of education diminishes the human in ways that are not always obvious. It is not like Solzhenitsyn’s description of Stalin’s Gulags, where becoming opaque and undifferentiated against the crowd of enslaved humanity became a survival skill. It is more subtle, a diminishment in degree, a progressive and incremental sacrifice, not yet so total as to become conspicuous, but consistently attenuating human qualities, properties, and virtues.
In the *Abolition of Man* argument, C.S. Lewis observes that two categories of reality are in tension. On the one hand, he argues, there exists as “reality” a set of observer-dependent institutional facts (social constructions) generated by the modern institution of education that engages in both enabling and constraining activity. It enables a new, socially constructed approach toward reality (subjectivism) and, at the same time, levies a destructive constraint on the information base to the individual – collective problem of social choice, advantaging a collective and disadvantaging the individual. It is a modern reality whose principles, in the growth environment, are drawn from some combination of subjectivism, scientific positivism, cosmic developmentalism, but most of all, naturalism. On the other hand, says Lewis, this new reality screens from view observer-independent teleological facts about what human development and flourishing should plausibly look like. It seeks to prevent a change of the rules when those rules would originate from within the Tao. Reform of men’s public affairs from an externality like the moral law is prohibited; purely secular reasons are what count in public discourse (see Audi and Wolterstorff 1996; Audi 2000). The third chapter of the *Abolition* describes the powerful social construction that acts as a propagandist, where power and persuasion lower costs in one direction but raise them in another, where man’s history and teleology mean very little and break from tradition and reality. Man as human becomes less able to exercise the intellectual and moral virtues because final causes have been traded off for efficient causes, and ends for means.

In the new reality any reliable reference to the brute facts of the moral law, any legitimate appeal to the objective mind-independent sphere escapes us: “We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful” (Lewis 2001a: 26). The “is” and the “ought” have been formally separated, though the “ought” creeps back in under the argument: “When all that says ‘it is good’ has been debunked, what says ‘I want’ remains. It cannot be exploded or ‘seen through’ because it never had any pretentions. The Conditioners, therefore, must come to be motivated simply by their own pleasure. . . . My point is that those who stand outside all judgments of value cannot have any ground for preferring one of their own impulses to another except the emotional strength of that impulse” (pp. 65–66). Instinct, technique, convention, and power are the new virtues. Rationality survives without reason as its guide. The modern institution of education asks its participants to stipulate to these new terms of production and the education of valueless facts ensues.¹