Chapter 7

Into the Twenty-First Century

Taking Things for Granted

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it comes quite naturally to many of us to refer to “traditional subjects” or “the traditional curriculum.” But although the roots of the tradition in question go back to the sixteenth century, it was not until the twentieth that people began to speak in this way.

Part of the reason for this has already been sketched above. The start of the twentieth century witnessed the incorporation of what had been seen as a form of private secondary education for a small section of the population into the apparatus of the state. By World War II, the influence of the traditional academic curriculum had been consolidated by developments in the examination system and in the rise of departmentalism and the power of subject associations. The postwar tripartite system entrenched its hegemony still further, as did curricular hierarchies established in comprehensive schools. The end of the twentieth century witnessed its statutory imposition on every maintained school, primary as well as secondary.

One consequence of this rise to power was that the virtues of the general education curriculum became increasingly taken for granted. In becoming the “traditional” curriculum, explicit justifications of it—in terms of religion, psychology, epistemology, ethics, or whatever—became progressively less and less necessary. In order to promote it, its adherents could rely on a shared set of assumptions that did not have to be spelled out. There is a great danger in this, as is clear from other realms where implicit appeals are made to “the way we have done things”—the old idea, for instance, that a woman’s place is in the home. This way of thinking
assumes that what has been customary is a good thing; it thus bypasses
the need to show that it is.

A striking early example of taking the encyclopedic curriculum as read
comes from R. H. Tawney’s 1922 essay *Secondary Education for All*. In line
with his egalitarian political views, Tawney wanted to extend secondary
education from a tiny minority to the whole of the population. He favored
a variety of types of secondary school, including not least those with a
practical orientation. But he did not question the existing, post-1904, sec-
ondary curriculum as providing a common core underpinning this variety,
as is clear in this passage:

> Although the subjects required by the Board, English, one foreign lan-
guage, geography, history, mathematics, science, and drawing, may provide
a common nucleus of study, the degree of emphasis laid on the linguistic,
as compared with the mathematical and scientific side, will naturally vary
from school to school (Tawney 1922: 30).

It is interesting that Tawney, a radical socialist reformer, did not, in redrawing
the map of English education from something like first principles,
begin farther back. He took current curriculum subjects as a basis, rather
than starting from general aims and then thinking about what curricular
activities are most fitted to realize these. True, he did have views on what
the goal of secondary education should be. He wrote:

> Defined by its purpose, its main aim is not to impart the specialised
technique of any particular trade or profession, but to develop the fac-
tulties which, because they are the attribute of man, are not peculiar to
any particular class or profession of men, and to build up the interests
which, while they may become the basis of specialisation at a later stage,
have a value extending beyond their utility for any particular vocation,
because they are the condition of a rational and responsible life in society
(p. 29).

As an account of educational aims, this is excessively abstract, and seems
to be indebted to a naturalist view of human good founded on the develop-
ment of faculties that belong to human nature as such—a questionable
view, given that it is as much part of our human makeup to be capable of
aggression as it is to be considerate or curious.

But if we overlook these deficiencies, the main point we come back to
is that Tawney assumed without question that the core curricular vehicles
needed to achieve his aim were “English, one foreign language, geography,