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The Triumph of Reason?

Why bad theories never die

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In Australia recently, I shared a public platform with an educationist, who had won awards for social innovation in the field of education for disadvantaged minorities. I was looking forward to what she had to say.

I was soon in a towering rage, however. She uttered some of the most foolish clichés of radical education theory, now about 40 years old—theories that I had fondly thought were now behind us, such as the harmful effects upon the children of disadvantaged ethnic groups or families of an emphasis on education as learning, with particular reference to the damage done to their self-esteem by the dominant culture's fetish about reading and writing.

These “technologies,” as the social innovator called them, were in any case on the verge of obsolescence because of computerized voice-recognition systems, so why teach them? Why not recognize children's individual strengths and natural creativity, and why not accept what their native cultures brought to the great smorgasbord of life (my expression, not hers): such as, presumably, singing and dancing and basket-weaving and female circumcision.

This was all said with such smugness, with such an expression of beatific complacency and self-content, that I wanted to get up and strangle the innovator there and then. As a believer in the necessity of self-expression, she would no doubt have understood. I recalled what one of my patients in the prison once said to me, to explain why he had murdered his girlfriend: “I had to kill her, doctor, or I don't know what I would have done.”

However, having been educated in precisely the kind of school that the innovator derided—namely, one in which I sat in a row with lots of other children and regularly heard in no uncertain terms that, being no more important than any other child in the class, I had wait my turn if I wanted to speak—I was able to control myself and even be polite in my reply.

I pointed out the obvious things, such as that the announcement of the death of reading and writing as a means of distant communication was premature, to say the least, and that if it was all right for children not to learn to read and write because it was in their culture not to do so, then was all right for them not to go to school at all; and that it took little imagination to understand how difficult and painful life in a modern society must be for someone who could neither read nor write properly.

Halfway through my own reply, however, I suddenly became bored. Why do I spend so much time arguing against such obvious rubbish, which should be both self-refuting and auto-satirizing the moment someone utters it? Why not just go and read a good book?

The problem is that nonsense can and does go by default. It wins the argument by sheer persistence, by

inexhaustible re-iteration, by staying at the meeting when everyone else has gone home, by monomania, by boring people into submission and indifference. And the reward of monomania? Power.