

“The Educated Student: Global Citizen or Global Consumer?” BENJAMIN R. BARBER

Before the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Benjamin Barber was a respected social scientist with a series of well-received scholarly and popular publications to his credit. After the attacks, he was trumpeted in the media as a prophet who had predicted the inevitable conflict between the “post-modern” culture of Western global capitalism and the more traditional tribal cultures that still dominate much of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. In the aftermath of 9/11, Barber’s Jihad vs. McWorld (1995) became a touchstone for interpreting the motives behind the al-Qaeda assault on the most famous symbols of American corporate and military power. In this selection written a year later, Barber reflects on how the events of 9/11 have forced us to rethink basic ideas like citizenship and independence and, ultimately, how American schools should respond to the challenges associated with life in a “globalized” world. Barber is the Gershon and Carol Kekst Professor of Civil Society at the University of Maryland and principal of the Democracy Collaborative in New York. His fifteen major publications include Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age and The Truth of Power: Intellectual Affairs in the Clinton White House (2001). This selection was excerpted from an address Barber originally delivered to the American Association of Colleges and Universities at its annual meeting in 2002.

I want to trace a quick trajectory from July 4, 1776 to Sept. 11, 2001. It takes us from the Declaration of Independence to the declaration of interdependence—not one that is actually yet proclaimed but one that we educators need to begin to proclaim from the pulpits of our classrooms and administrative suites across America.

In 1776 it was all pretty simple for people who cared about both education and democracy. There was nobody among the extraordinary group of men who founded this nation who did not know that democracy—then an inventive, challenging, experimental new system of government—was dependent for its success not just on constitutions, laws, and institutions, but dependent for its success on the quality of citizens who would constitute the new republic. Because democracy depends on citizenship, the emphasis then was to think about what and how to constitute a competent and virtuous citizen body. That led directly, in almost every one of the founders' minds, to the connection between citizenship and education.

Whether you look at Thomas Jefferson in Virginia or John Adams in Massachusetts, there was widespread agreement that the new republic, for all of the cunning of its inventive and experimental new Constitution, could not succeed unless the citizenry was well educated. That meant that in the period after the Revolution but before the ratification of the Constitution, John Adams argued hard for schools for every young man in Massachusetts (it being the case, of course, that only men could be citizens). And in Virginia, Thomas Jefferson made the same argument for public schooling for every potential citizen in America, founding the first great public university there. Those were arguments that were uncontested.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century this logic was clear in the common school movement and later, in the land grant colleges. It was clear in the founding documents of every religious, private, and public higher education institution in this country. Colleges and universities had to be committed above all to the constituting of citizens. That's what education was about. The other aspects of it—literacy, knowledge, and research—were in themselves important. Equally important as dimensions of education and citizenship was education that would make the Bill of Rights real, education that would make democracy succeed.

It was no accident that in subsequent years, African Americans and then women struggled for a place and a voice in this system, and the key was always seen as education. If women were to be citizens, then women's education would have to become central to suffragism.¹ After the Civil War, African Americans were given technical liberty but remained in many ways in economic servitude. Education again was seen as the key. The struggle over education went on, through *Plessy vs. Ferguson*² in 1896—separate, but equal—right down to the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education*,³ which declared separate but equal unconstitutional.

In a way our first 200 years were a clear lesson in the relationship between democracy, citizenship, and education, the triangle on which the freedom of America depended. But sometime after the Civil War with the emergence of great corporations and of an economic system organized around private capital, private labor, and private markets, and with the import from Europe of models of higher education devoted to scientific research, we began to see a gradual change in the character of American education generally and particularly the character of higher education in America's colleges and universities. From the founding of Johns Hopkins at the end of the nineteenth century through today we have witnessed the professionalization, the bureaucratization, the privatization, the commercialization, and the individualization of education. Civics stopped being the envelope in which education was put and became instead a footnote on the letter that went inside and nothing more than that.

With the rise of industry, capitalism, and a market society, it came to pass that young people were exposed more and more to tutors other than teachers in their classrooms or even those who were in their churches, their synagogues - and today, their mosques as well. They were increasingly exposed to the informal education of popular opinion, of advertising, of merchandising, of the entertainment industry. Today it is a world whose messages come at our young people from those ubiquitous screens that define modern society and have little to do with anything that you teach. The large screens of the multiplex promote content determined not just by Hollywood but by multinational corporations that control information, technology, communication, sports, and entertainment. About ten of those corporations control over 60 to 70 percent of what appears on those screens.

Then, too, there are those medium-sized screens, the television sets that peek from every room of our homes. That's where our children receive not the twenty-eight to thirty hours a week of instruction they might receive in primary and secondary school, or the six or nine hours a week of classroom instruction they might get in college, but where they get anywhere from forty to seventy hours a week of ongoing "information," "knowledge," and above all, entertainment. The barriers between these very categories of information and entertainment are themselves largely vanished.

Then, there are those little screens, our computer screens, hooked up to the Internet. Just fifteen years ago they were thought to be a potential new electronic frontier for democracy. But today very clearly they are one more mirror of a commercialized, privatized society where everything is for sale. The Internet which

¹ *suffragism*: The movement to gain women the right to vote.

² *Plessy vs. Ferguson*: 1896 Supreme Court case that established the "separate but equal" doctrine of legal discrimination practiced in the South in the form of "Jim Crow" laws until the 1950s.

³ *Brown vs. Board of Education*: The 1954 Supreme Court case that reversed *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

our children use is now a steady stream of advertising, mass marketing, a virtual mail, a place where the violence, the values—for better or worse—of these same universal corporations reappear in video games and sales messages. Ninety-five to 97 percent of the hits on the Internet are commercial. Of those, 25 to 30 percent are hits on pornographic sites. Most of our political leaders are deeply proud that they have hooked up American schools to the Internet, and that we are a “wired nation.” We have, however, in effect hooked up our schools to what in many ways is a national sewer.

In the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville⁴ talked about the “immense tutelary power” of that other source of learning, not education, but public opinion. Now public opinion has come under the control of corporate conglomerates whose primary interest is profit. They are willing to put anything out there that will sell and make a profit.

We have watched this commercialization and privatization, a distortion of the education mission and its content, going to the heart of our schools themselves. Most American colleges and universities now are participants—and in some ways beneficiaries—but ultimately victims of the cola wars. Is your college a Pepsi college or a Coke college? Which do you have a contract with? And which monopoly do your kids have to drink the goods of? While you are busy teaching them the importance of critical choices, they can only drink one cola beverage on this campus. Choice ends at the cafeteria door.

Go to what used to be the food services cafeteria of your local college or university and in many cases you will now find a food court indistinguishable from the local mall featuring Taco Bell, Starbucks, McDonalds, and Burger King. Yes, they are feeding students, but more importantly, they are creating a venue in the middle of campus for what is not education, but an acquisition-of-brands learning. Brand learning means getting young people on board: any merchandiser will tell you, “If we can get the kids when they are in high school and college to buy into our brand, we’ve got them for life.”

Consequences of De-funding

Part of privatization means the de-funding of public institutions, of culture and education, and the de-funding of universities, and so these institutions make a pact with the devil. A real mischief of the modern world (one that colleges haven't yet encountered) is Channel One, which goes into our nation's junior high schools and high schools—particularly the poor ones, those in the inner-city that can't afford their own technology or their own equipment. It makes this promise: “We're not going to give it to you, but we'll lease you some equipment: television sets, maybe a satellite dish, some modems, maybe even a few computers, if you do one thing. Once a day make sure that every student in this school sits in the classroom and watches a very nice little twelve-minute program. Only three minutes of it will be advertising. Let us feed advertising to your kids during a history or a social studies class, and we will lend you some technology.”

Most states—New York state is the only one that has held out—in America have accepted Channel One, which is now in over twelve or thirteen thousand high schools around the nation. Our students sit during class time, possibly a social studies or history class, and watch advertising. I dare say, if somebody said they

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville: French politician and writer (1805-1859), famed for his reflections on American society and culture in *Democracy in America* (volume 1, 1835 and volume 11, 1840).

were going to give you some equipment as long as you watch the message of Christ or the church of Christ for three minutes a day, or said they were going to give you some equipment as long as you listen to the message of the Communist Party or the Democratic party during class for three out of twelve minutes, there would be an outcry and an uproar. Totalitarianism! State propaganda! Theocracy! But because they have been so degradingly de-funded, we have allowed our schools to be left without the resources to resist this deal with the devil.

Tell me why it is in the modern world that when a political party or a state takes over the schools and spews its propaganda into them and takes over every sector of society, we call that political totalitarianism and oppose it as the denial of liberty. And when a church or a religion takes over every sector of society and spews its propaganda forth in its schools, we call it theocratic and totalitarian and go to war against it. But when the market comes in with its brands and advertising and takes over every sector of society and spews its propaganda in our schools, we call it an excellent bargain on the road to liberty. I don't understand that, and I don't think we should put up with it, and I don't think America should put up with it. I know the people who sell it would not sit for a minute if their own children, sitting in private schools somewhere, were exposed to that commercial advertising. They're not paying \$25,000 a year to have their kids watch advertising in the classroom. But, of course, it's not their children's schools that are at risk; it's mostly the schools of children of families who don't have much of a say about these things.

Imagine how far Channel One has come from Jefferson's dream, from John Adams's dream, the dream of the common school. And how low we have sunk as a society where we turn our heads and say, "Well, it's not so bad, it's not really, it's just advertising." Advertisers know how valuable the legitimizing venue of the classroom is and pay double the rates of prime time to advertise on Channel One, not because the audience is so broad but because it is the perfect target audience and because it gets that extraordinary legitimization of the American classroom where what kids believe you "learn" in your classroom has to be true.

Commercialization and privatization go right across the board. You see them in every part of our society. You see cultural institutions increasingly dependent on corporate handouts. Because we will not fund the arts, the arts, too, like education have to make a profit. In our universities and colleges, scientists are now selling patents and making deals that the research they do will benefit not humanity and their students, but the shareholders of corporations, and so their research will otherwise be kept private. Again, most administrators welcome that because they don't have to raise faculty research budgets. The corporate world will take care of that.

These practices change the nature of knowledge and information. They privatize, making research a part of commercial enterprise. That's the kind of bargain we have made with our colleges and universities. We hope that somehow the faculty will remain insulated from it. We hope the students won't notice, but then when they're cynical about politics and about the administration, and cynical about their own education, and when they look to their own education as a passport to a hot job and big money—and nothing else—we wonder what's going on with them.

But of course students see everything; they have noses for hypocrisy. Students see the hypocrisy of a society that talks about the importance of education and knowledge and information while its very educational institutions are selling their own souls for a buck, and they're doing it because the society otherwise won't support them adequately, is unwilling to tax itself, is unwilling to ask itself for

sufficient funds to support quality education. That's where we are. That's where we were on September 10.

What We've Learned

On September 11 a dreadful, pathological act occurred, which nonetheless may act in a brutal way as a kind of tutorial for America and for its educators. On that day, it suddenly became apparent to many people who'd forgotten it that America was no longer a land of independence or sovereignty, a land that could "go it alone." America was no longer capable of surviving as a free democracy unless it began to deal in different terms with a world that for 200 years it had largely ignored and in the last fifty or seventy-five years had treated in terms of that sad phrase "collateral damage." Foreign policy was about dealing with the collateral damage of America being America, America being commercialized, America being prosperous, America "doing well" in the economic sense—if necessary, at everybody else's expense.

September 11 was a brutal and perverse lesson in the inevitability of interdependence in the modern world—and of the end of independence, where America could simply go it alone. It was the end of the time in which making a buck for individuals would, for those that were doing all right, be enough; somehow the fact that the rest of the world was in trouble and that much of America was in trouble—particularly its children (one out of five in poverty)—was incidental. After thirty years of privatization and commercialization, the growing strength of the ideology that said the era not just of government, but of big government was over; that said, this was to be the era of markets, and markets will solve every problem: education, culture, you name it, the markets can do it.

On September 11 it became clear that there were areas in which the market could do nothing: terrorism, poverty, injustice, war. The tragedy pointed to issues of democracy and equality and culture, and revealed a foreign policy that had been paying no attention. In the early morning of September 12, nobody called Bill Gates at Microsoft or Michel Eisner at Disney and said "Help us, would you? You market guys have good solutions. Help us get the terrorists." Indeed, the heroes of September 11 were public officials, public safety officers: policemen, firemen, administrators, even a mayor who found his soul during that period. Those were the ones we turned to and suddenly understood that they played a public role representing all of us.

Suddenly, Americans recognized that its citizens were the heroes. Not the pop singers, fast-ball pitchers, and the guys who make all the money in the NBA; not those who've figured out how to make a fast buck by the time they're thirty, the Internet entrepreneurs. In the aftermath of 9/11, it was particularly those public-official-citizens. All citizens because in what they do, they are committed to the welfare of their neighbors, their children, to future generations. That's what citizens are supposed to do: think about the communities to which they belong and pledge themselves to the public good of those communities. Hence the importance of the civic professions like teaching. In most countries, in fact, teachers and professors are public officials. They are seen, like firemen and policemen, as guardians of the public good, of the *res publica*,⁵ those things of the public that we all care about. On September 11 and the days afterwards, it became clear how important those folks were. As a consequence, a kind of closing of a door occasioned by the fall of the towers became an opening of a window of new

⁵ *res publica*: Latin for "the common good."

opportunities, new possibilities, new citizenship: an opportunity to explore interdependence. Interdependence is another word for citizenship.

Citizenship in the World

The citizen is the person who acknowledges and recognizes his or her interdependence in a neighborhood, a town, a state, in a nation—and today, in the world. Anyone with eyes wide open during the last thirty to forty years has known that the world has become interdependent in ineluctable and significant ways. AIDS and the West Nile Virus don't carry passports. They go where they will. The Internet doesn't stop at national boundaries; it's a worldwide phenomenon. Today's telecommunications technologies define communications and entertainment all over the world without regard to borders. Global warming recognizes no sovereignty, and nobody can say he or she won't have to suffer the consequences of polluted air. Ecology, technology, and of course economics and markets are global in character, and no nation can pretend that its own destiny is any longer in its own hands in the manner of eighteenth and nineteenth century nations.

In particular, this nation was the special land where independence had been declared, and our two oceans would protect us from the world. We went for several hundred years thinking America was immune to the problems and tumult and prejudices of the wars of the world beyond the oceans. And then 9/11—and suddenly it became clear that no American could ever rest comfortably in bed at night if somewhere, someone else in the world was starving or someone's children were at risk. With 9/11 it became apparent that whatever boundaries once protected us and whatever new borders we were trying to build including the missile shield (a new technological “virtual ocean” that would protect us from the world) were irrelevant.

Multilateralism becomes a new mandate of national security, a necessity. There are no oceans wide enough, there are no walls high enough to protect America from the rest of our world. What does that say about education? It means that for the first time a lot of people who didn't care about civic education—the education of citizens, the soundness of our own democracy, the ability of our children to understand the world—now suddenly recognize this is key, that education counts. Multicultural education counts because we have to understand the cultures of other worlds. Language education counts because language is a window on other cultures and histories.

Citizenship is now the crucial identity. We need to think about what an adequate civic education means today, and what it means to be a citizen. We need education-based community service programs. We need experiential learning, not just talking about citizenship but exercises in doing it. We need to strongly support the programs around the country that over the '80s and '90s sprang up but have recently been in decline.

But we also need new programs in media literacy. I talked about the way in which a handful of global corporations control the information channels of television, the Internet, and Hollywood. We need young people who are sophisticated in media, who understand how media work, how media affect them, how to resist, how to control, how to become immune to media. Media literacy and media studies from my point of view become a key part of how we create a new civic education. Of course history, the arts, sociology, and anthropology, and all of those fields that make young people aware of the rest of the world in a comparative fashion are more important than ever before.

We are a strange place because we are one of the most multicultural nations on Earth with people in our schools from all over the world, and yet we know less than most nations about the world from which those people come. At one and the same time, we are truly multicultural, we represent the globe, and yet we know little about it.

Coming Full Circle

In coming full circle, the trajectory from the Declaration of Independence 200 years ago to the declaration of interdependence that was sounded on September 11 opens an opportunity for us as educators to seize the initiative to make civic education central again. The opportunity to free education from the commercializers and privatizers, to take it back for civic education and for our children, and to make the schools of America and the world the engines of democracy and liberty and freedom that they were supposed to be. And that's not just an abstraction. That starts with addressing commercialization directly: confronting Channel One and the food court at your local college, the malling of your cafeterias, and the sellout of corporate research.

There are things that every one of us can do inside our own colleges and universities. If we do, our students will notice. And if we really make our colleges and universities democratic, civic, independent, autonomous, international, and multilateral again, we will no longer even need civics classes. Our students will take one look at what we've done in the university and understand the relationship between education and democracy. That must be our mission. I hope that as individual citizens, teachers, administrators, you will take this mission seriously. I certainly do, and I know that as before, the future of liberty, the future of democracy in both America and around the world, depends most of all on its educational institutions and on the teachers and administrators who control them. Which means we really are in a position to determine what our future will be.

ENGAGING THE TEXT

1. What, according to Barber, did the men who founded the United States believe about the role of education in a democratic society? In what ways might education be seen as preparing a person for democratic citizenship? How effectively has your own education prepared you to participate in democratic government?
2. How did the rise of corporate capitalism change American education, in Barber's view? What has the "corporatization" of higher education done to America's colleges? Would you agree with Barber that we should resist what he calls the "privatization" of knowledge? Why or why not?
3. Why does Barber object to the presence of Channel One in American secondary schools? Would you agree that the presence of advertising in schools amounts to a kind of "corporate totalitarianism"?
4. What does Barber seem to mean by the concept of "citizenship" in this essay? Why has the idea of the citizen become so important to Barber in a Post-9/11 world? Would you agree that the events of 9/11 have forced us to replace pride in our independence with the recognition of what Barber terms our "interdependence"? Why or why not?

EXTENDING THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

5. Research the extent of your college's dependency on corporate capitalism. What evidence of corporate presence can you see around you when you walk through your campus? What corporations provide funding and other forms of support for your college's science labs, arts facilities, or endowed faculty positions? How has the ratio of public to private funding changed for your college over the past fifty years? Overall, would you agree with Barber that your college has been "corporatized" and that it has been "left without the resources to resist this deal with the devil"? Why or why not?
6. Working in groups, make a rough outline of the courses you feel should be required in college to prepare students for participation in a global society. To what extent do you expect your own college education to include this global emphasis?