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by Heather Michel

FILE	MICHELH-OMDE606-A1.DOCX (22.54K)		
TIME SUBMITTED	22-SEP-2015 06:26AM	WORD COUNT	1536
SUBMISSION ID	573049097	CHARACTER COUNT	8259

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Social Justice, Economics and Distance Education

Summary

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The main point of Rumble's (2007) article is that education is a basic right and life-long need of human beings. As such, education is one of the obligations of a government toward its citizens. Rumble discusses the thought process that caused governments to begin paying for the education of their citizens and the newer thought processes that are leading education away from government control. He strives to show why the newer thought processes are irresponsible and uncaring toward the lower class of people who have a "bad life" as defined by philosopher Honderich. In the end, Rumble suggests that governments collect the money necessary to provide free education for all citizens by restructuring the income tax system to require more from the wealthy.

Strengths and Weaknesses

There is a lot to be said about Rumble's arguments in this article. First of all, not everyone would agree with Rumble's initial premises. He believes 3 that education is a "fundamental human right" and a "lifelong need" (p 167). At this point, the question must be asked, "What is education?" The answer to this question will differ among societies. An agricultural society, for example, might not consider themselves in need of lifelong education at an institution of higher learning. However, they might agree that it is important to continue to learn from experience about how plants grow or about the weather and climate of their region. Industrial societies, on the other hand, value education based on vocational training that prepares citizens for jobs, while post-modern societies perceive education in terms of degrees and certificates earned at professional learning institutions. Industrial societies are likely to see education as a human right because it opens doors to better jobs and ultimately a better life for

the individual. Post-modern societies are likely to extend the human right to education into a need for life-long learning as they realize that their world is rapidly changing and that citizens need to keep up with the changes.

Addressing another point that Rumble makes in his introduction, due to the tremendous changes in education since the turn of the century, it is not obvious that education will continue to be as expensive as it is now. It could very well be that everything is automated by 2050, the year Rumble uses to declare that education “will be hugely expensive” (p 167). Once the initial costs have been covered, there may be no further costs of education save the maintenance of the technological infrastructure. This possibility is simply an extension of one reason why distance education developed so thoroughly in the 20th century: “because it provided a cheaper option of meeting demand” (p 167).

One strength of the article is the detailing of the thought process behind both sides of the issue. Beginning his arguments, Rumble explains that the nation-state of the 20th century is currently giving way to the market-state (p 168). Whereas the nation-state's purpose was mainly to provide for the citizens, the market-state's purpose is to provide choices to them. The main thought processes behind the market-state, libertarian thinking and economic thinking, hold that investing in the lives of citizens is too expensive to be worthwhile, that people living “bad lives” is not the state's responsibility to correct. This thought process is supported by Wolf's findings that national economic growth does not directly derive from more education of the nation's citizens (Wolf, 2002). Rumble argues, from a sociological point of view, that the government “should ensure all people have a chance to live a fully human life”, including education being provided “cheaply and flexibly to meet the lifelong needs ...” (p 168). He posits that “there was general acceptance that the nation-state had a major obligation to provide education to its citizens

for economic (and military) reasons” (p 169). Besides the factor of nationwide economic growth, human rights proponents advocated the egalitarian concept of a basic human right to education. Then in the late 20th century, “the consensus that the state had an obligation to educate its citizens was challenged by the belief that investment in education (at least beyond a basic level) is a matter for the individual rather than the state” (p 169).

A weakness in Rumble’s sociological argument, however, is that it is focused only on Western civilization in the past century. Up until a few hundred years ago, even grade school education was not free in Europe; it was private and paid for by the family. Apprenticeship was the way for the lower classes to get educated as they exchanged labor for schooling. Democracy, the Western style of government, now advocates for the provision of state-supported education for the masses. There are, however, still many other styles of government in the world which do not find it necessary to educate every citizen at its expense. Rather, they support their best scholars to continue in education.

Respective Value Stance

Rumble uses the values of philosopher Honderich to argue that those with limited access to education have a “bad life”. Government is failing in its purpose to meet its citizens’ basic needs when lower classes do not have sufficient resources to have a good quality of life. Perhaps the schools still funded by government, grade-schools, need to reevaluate what is being taught. Students should be taught self-sufficiency and how to live the “good life” in their country and according to their own culture. Education needs to be tailored to how the people of each region think and live. The wealthy need higher education in order to become professionals and learn the stricter etiquette of leaders. The poorer people need vocational training to help them earn more

money by doing labor. These are not strict boundaries, but guidelines that can bring various groups of people more of what they are comfortable with achieving.

The purpose of education is not to remove people from their “bad life” but to help them become better at what they do so they can improve their life into a “good life”. Uneducated, uncultured children will result in society becoming chaotic. To stay away from needing military force to control a wild society, there is a need to educate the children in etiquette and critical thinking in primary schools. Now that distance education is including masses of the lower class into the higher education arena, education is being forced to cover what adults should have learned as children. For example, there is merit to the idea of teaching the lower class citizens to repair technological items so they can have the state-of-the-art without the retail cost. This would eliminate the need to fight each other for what they cannot afford.

Rumble argues, “¹In a world where millions of lives are ‘bad lives’, and where education is a means to economic betterment, better health awareness and power through knowledge, there is a moral case for ensuring that education is given to everyone, irrespective of their economic circumstances” (p 175). Rumble values distance education as “a way of making more education available ¹to more people, often to those who are socially disadvantaged” (p 174-5). He was pleased with the government shouldering much of the set up and daily cost of distance education projects. Any fees left for the students were minimized “so as to ²not deter applications from those in lower socio-economic groups” (p 169).

Deviating from the mainstream, Rumble does not recognize the value of research: “²We also need to ensure that the maximum number of people possible can be educated for the minimum outlay. ... [D]istance ²educators have an obligation to keep their costs down so that what money there is can go further. There should be no question of ‘profits’ from teaching

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September 20, 2015

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funding the other things that academics like to do—such as research” (p 175). Without research, however, the institution is not credible, which leads to devaluing the diplomas of the students. This disallows access to improvement of life, so that students stay in the “bad life”, having wasted four years and many thousands of dollars. Education becomes an unopened doorway that leads to hopelessness.

Honderich’s opinion of what constitutes a “good life” and a “bad life” and Rumble’s arguments deriving from that opinion (p 172) are very Euro-American centric and vary drastically from opinions of other cultures. The living standards that the lower classes of undeveloped nations routinely experience would be classified as abuse in Western countries. Conversely, the “bad life” in a first-world nation would be considered to be a “good life” in a third-world nation. It has been proposed that the term Globalization of Education would be more aptly named Westernization of Education as most of the education being shared on the Internet is in the Western style and laced with the colonial thought process that the European way is intrinsically superior. Rumble’s arguments would hold more weight if they preserved and valued other cultures more.

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References

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