

## What Do Americans Value Most?

Material Success: *The American Dream!*

### The Gist of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Schoolbooks

The concept of American culture presented in these schoolbooks, therefore, had prepared him for a life devoted to the pursuit of material success and a perfected character, but a life in which intellectual and artistic achievements would seem important only when they could be made to subserve some useful purpose.

The child was of course influenced by things other than schoolbooks. But the latter came from authority, and laid a careful foundation particularly important in those areas of thought in which the child might have little personal experience. The nineteenth-century schoolbook, as compared to that of the twentieth century, had relatively little competition from outside sources of information, and poorly trained teachers were often entirely dependent on the text adopted for use in their schools. The method of the classroom in most schools consisted primarily in memorizing the schoolbook.

And the child who accepted the meaning of the words that he memorized would consider scholarship and the fine arts mere embellishments identified with Europe and therefore with a civi-

### The Immigrants, 1880-1920

That determination was expressed in their criticism of the deficiencies of life in the United States. To the immigrants America seemed unstable; it lacked the orderly elements of existence. Without security of status or the recognition of rank, no man, no family, had a proper place in the social order. Only money talked, for Americans measured all things in terms of gold and invariably preferred the superficial and immediate to the permanent and substantial.

### G. E. Carrothers, Prof. U. of Michigan, 1948

In education, competition is keen only in the field of sports.

lization that he was taught to reject as inferior to his own. He would expect men of talent in the arts to serve their nationality consciously in their art. He would think it a waste of time to engage himself in these fields; American creativity was and should be directed to the immediately practical. Only when the artist or the scholar used his talents for the extension of good morals, for the development of a comfortable material existence, or for the propagation of nationalism was his work to be respected as good art or scholarship. Guided by his schoolbooks the nineteenth-century American child would grow up to be honest, industrious, religious, and moral. He would be a useful citizen untouched by the effeminate and perhaps even dangerous influence of the arts or scholarship. The concept of American culture presented in these schoolbooks, therefore, had prepared him for a life devoted to the pursuit of material success and a perfected character, but a life in which intellectual and artistic achievements would seem important only when they could be made to subserve some useful purpose.

### Robert Hutchins, Pres. Emeritus. UC. 1950s

One of the most important ideas about education is compressed into the Platonic line: "What is honored in a country will be cultivated there."

We must admit that what is honored in America is material success. . . . .  
. . . . . The model American is the successful businessman. . . . .  
. . . . . Consequently the attention of the American is drawn at an early date to the necessity of adjusting himself to his economic environment in such a way that he will be successful.

### President of the Educational Testing Service, 1993

As a culture we seem to value beauty and brawn far more than brains.

**G. E. Carrothers, Prof. U. of Michigan, 1948**

In education, competition is keen only in the field of sports. Studies are made there to obtain the best results from the youth involved; participants are pushed to their limit. In almost all other areas of education, time and energy are wasted in large amounts, often without those in administrative charge recognizing the avenues of waste.

Probably the greatest harm being done to innocent, helpless children is that of gradually giving them the notion that education is of so little importance and so easily secured that it can be obtained "on the run." Pupils, parents, taxpayers, and the public are being shortchanged right in front of their eyes, and they are seemingly helpless or unconcerned.

**Refugee Intellectual, 1950s**

For example, one refugee told of his bewilderment at the fact that every boy and even young men and sometimes even adults spent so much time playing baseball. He could view them from his apartment window playing in the streets. It quite baffled him, he said, until he learned that some baseball players received \$80,000 a year for playing: "Then I understood why everyone plays baseball here. They all hope to make a lot of money some day. In America everything people do is for money." This belief would seem to be fairly common among refugees. Of those interviewed a third commented, "Americans live only for money. In Europe we had other values."

While there is no question that money plays an important part in American life in fixing status and as a motivating force, the great importance given to it by some refugees does not square with the facts.

The other question refers to social standing. The European comes from a society which is more or less rigidly stratified. Though most Europeans will relatively easily adjust themselves to American democracy, many scholars will find it difficult to reconcile themselves with the different position of the intellectual in this country. He will feel futile at times, out of contact with the social reality and offended by the fact that the successful businessman rules society. He often feels simply tolerated as higher learning is tolerated, as a luxury. He talks to the Rotary club for a meal and finds himself appreciated but not in an essential way. He makes no difference.

In teaching he will often act as if he were still in a European University, a graduate school for a select group drawn from a small social class. He will find it difficult to understand that it is the student who is at the center of the American system and not the professor.

### Wealth: the Measure of All Things

The history of the colonial villages in the seventeenth century is primarily a tale of commercial expansion. In this period the five towns grew from wilderness settlements to fully developed little seaports challenging comparison with any European centers of the same size. The necessary corollary of this growth was the accumulation of capital, derived not only from the extension of wholesale trade by enterprising merchants but also from the small savings of prosperous tradesmen and artisans. A rise in the standard of living, historically one of the outstanding characteristics of American life, accompanied the increasing prosperity of life in the villages. The infectious winds of trade, blowing through the colonial settlements, everywhere stirred up the commercial spirit. As early as 1650 Edward Johnson noted that the merchants, traders and vintners of Boston “would willingly have had the Commonwealth tolerate divers kinds of sinful opinions to intice men to come and sit down with us, that their purses might be filled with coin.” “New England was originally a plantation of Religion, not a plantation of Trade,” thundered John Higginson in his election sermon of 1663. “Let Merchants, and such as are increasing Cent per Cent remember this.” And John Hull, who, though a merchant, was an ardent theocrat, perceived sadly that “Self-interest is too predominant in many.”<sup>65</sup> So soon did dwellers in this City of God find profits in the service of Mammon! This same leaven was quietly at work increasing cent per cent in the other villages, preparing the breakdown of time-worn medieval practices, and facilitating the transition to modern capitalism that was transforming the western world.

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As yet colonial society was too young to insist upon heredity as the basis for social distinction; with the possible exception of the clerical rule at Boston, wealth was still the measure of all things. This being the case, a humble man, like Sir William Phips, might strike it rich and be elevated to the aristocracy.

The First Century of Urban Life in America 1625-1742, 1938.