

Talk of the Day

The Question of Education

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

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The question before us is not how knowledge should be taught; that is an issue we may return to later. The real question is why we teach knowledge at all. I would very much like to see many people take up this question, reflect on it seriously, and publish their studies and opinions, for there can be no doubt that great good would come of this.

The answer to this question necessarily varies according to the person to whom it is addressed. If you were to ask the Ministry of Education why knowledge is taught in state schools, you would receive two very different answers: one from the British, and another from the Egyptians who work within the Ministry.

The British answer is well known; they have published it openly and made no attempt to conceal it. Their political representatives have stated it plainly, and their journalists have repeated it: knowledge is taught so that we may work in government offices as minor employees, supervised by domineering superiors who are British. Education, therefore, must rest on two foundations, touching both its quantity and its quality, as philosophers would say.

The first principle is that the amount we learn should be small—indeed, very small—so limited that it does not allow us to rise above our petty and insignificant tasks in government offices. The second principle is that what we learn, and the way we learn it, should be so poor and defective as to prevent any personal life marked by individual independence, self-awareness, or creative capacity.

These two principles are sufficient to achieve the aim the British sought in the Ministry of Education: that we should learn little, and that we should learn that little badly. Our minds must not grow; and the minds denied growth must be so deformed and distorted that they grasp nothing properly and are incapable of moving from one judgment to another, or from one idea to the next—incapable, therefore, of managing life well. If the British succeeded in applying these two principles, then they succeeded in securing their colonial authority without exposing themselves to any serious danger. This is the British answer, and it is clear and intelligible. The British are, above all, colonizers, and it would be unreasonable to ask a colonizer to turn the country he seeks to dominate into a strong nation worthy of independence and capable of achieving it.

The answer of the Egyptians who work in the Ministry of Education is far harder to pin down, because in many cases it does not exist at all.