

A Reconstructionist amid Orthodoxies

Unseasonable Truths. The Life of Robert Maynard Hutchins. HARRY S. ASHMORE. Little, Brown, Boston, 1989. xx, 616 pp. + plates. \$27.50.

Robert Maynard Hutchins knew a life of controversy. He invited it. Every institutional challenge he undertook he undertook with the intention of rooting its work in basic principles, in fundamental ideas that would define its purpose. He was an enthusiast, but an enthusiast for reason. One can mark the various contours of his career in that sentence. Living in this way made Hutchins one of the most celebrated educational leaders of his time. But in the end it marked him as a magnificent failure.

Harry Ashmore has written an engaging and informative biography of Hutchins. The book concentrates heavily on Hutchins's personality and leadership style. Ashmore labels Hutchins a "worldly Puritan." ("I never wanted to be a millionaire," Hutchins said. "I only wanted to live like one.") Hutchins's father was an otherworldly Presbyterian minister who saw life mostly in the form of the temptations it offered. If Hutchins gradually moved away from that perspective, he nonetheless lived within the outline of his religious heritage. There was missionary zeal in all his efforts, an obsession with establishing first principles, a disdain for the frivolous, and an impatience with obstacles in his path. What emerged amid these traits was Hutchins's caustic wit, his ever-ready sarcasm, his withering rhetorical assaults against those who stood athwart his path.

Those who earliest knew him marked Hutchins for leadership. He was president of the freshman class at Oberlin College, became a bon vivant at Yale, and at age 28 assumed the deanship of its law school. Two years later the "boy wonder" was installed as president of the University of Chicago. And all eyes were on him.

Hutchins's tenure at Chicago marks one of the most celebrated chapters in American academic history. But there was little in his life to this date that anticipated the kind of reformer he became. At Yale he had sought to modernize legal studies by immersing them in the social sciences. The Yale version

of "legal realism" raised that university's status and its renown as a center of experimentation in legal studies. But at Chicago it was the social sciences (and natural sciences too) that Hutchins came to disdain. They would represent to him the triumphs of an empirical academic culture—shallow, shortsighted, and, at their worst, simply anti-intellectual.

If Hutchins could no longer embrace the Christian theology of his father, he could identify enthusiastically with a metaphysical tradition rooted in Aristotle and extended to Thomism and natural law metaphysics. That conversion was effected by Mortimer Adler, to the point that Hutchins could remark that his real education began under Adler's tutelage. Moreover, it was Adler who showed Hutchins, by memo after memo to the new president, how to initiate a reconstruction of the whole undergraduate program at Chicago. There followed the famous seminars, where the Socratic method reigned, the Great Books Program, the new general education curriculum, and the propagandizing of the new order as the promise of an invigorated democratic society in the United States. In the judgment of Hutchins's enemies, these programs represented a "medieval" reactionism.

It is fascinating to follow Ashmore's accounts here, especially as they detail the organizational locus of the ensuing battles. A university does not respond readily to change, and in the end Chicago dismantled many of Hutchins's reforms. But Hutchins's mind had been fixed. He became a prominent voice of dissent in the preparedness campaign in the years before World War II, insisting that Americans must first learn and practice at home the real meaning of their democratic ideals. He believed the nation entered the war with little sense of what it was actually fighting for.

The search for the precise definition and elaboration of those ideals also motivated Hutchins's work at the Ford Foundation, the Fund for the Republic, and the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. He wanted the best minds in the country to be at these places. They met in seminars, and they talked. Hutchins organized star-studded symposia on the subjects of civil rights

and peace. What he did he did in a grand way. In the course of his life he raised and spent millions of dollars for his causes.

It is not clear how Hutchins himself would assess his accomplishments. By admission he was an optimist, but he saw the nation move from crisis to crisis, perilously uncertain of its true purposes. Surely his work for civil rights had an impact; it is doubtful that the peace program did. The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions was a failing enterprise before Hutchins withdrew from its headship. Nor is Ashmore himself exactly certain what constitutes Hutchins's legacy.

One thing can be said. Hutchins took a prominent part in one of the most interesting and important debates of our time. His role in it will, to me, make him a worthy figure to study. In 1973, Edward A. Purcell, Jr., in *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*, reviewed in detail the extended debate over the intellectual foundations of democracy as waged by American intellectuals from the 1920s and into the 1950s. Hutchins stood out among those who insisted that democracy must be intellectually rooted in some basis of permanent truth. He and others of like mind were opposed by partisans of a pragmatic tradition that considered absolute truth however defined an ingredient of totalitarian politics.

Usually the defenders of orthodoxies were political conservatives as well (Richard Weaver's book of 1948, *Ideas Have Consequences*, shows that affiliation), and the pragmatists were almost invariably liberal progressives. But Hutchins was clearly a man of the political left. He once supported Norman Thomas and was otherwise an active Democrat who urged his party toward a more reformist agenda. Hutchins and the tax-exempt foundations he led became a focus of right-wing attacks in the McCarthy era. By this time Hutchins had conjoined his intellectual first principles with democratic liberalism. When that program was made to embrace a peace effort critical of American Cold War policies, he received a rebuke from one of the foremost pragmatic philosophers of this century, Sidney Hook.

Hutchins was always strong-willed. He could be vitriolic, but he was not intolerant. At Chicago he hired people of opposing views, and at the Center he tolerated several fools. But wherever he was, he called institutions to their highest purposes. For human beings that should be always the life of reason. In an age of academic confusion, his life is worth remembering.

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