

## The critique of radical education

The progressive man is discontented because his fellows have not reached the point which he has reached. Youth is naturally discontented because it arrives in a world of older men thinking in the terms of the previous generation. Education is the device by which the previous generation puts a brake on youth. The majority are duly restrained because education is reinforced by religious prejudice and armed with the threat of economic failure. In other words, youth must accept the education of its predecessors or fail to establish economic security. Education, however, is never powerful enough to restrain a minority. This minority in revolting against its education begins presently to desire to revolt against the social scheme which produces such an education. This minority thus steps beyond the problems of its own education and, inspired by discontent, observes immense numbers of human beings who ought to be discontented with their servile lot apparently unaware that the remedy lies in their own hands. This minority becomes a revolutionary minority. Of such are university students, poets, and constitutionally sentimental liberals. On most of them the economic struggle exercises such a deadening influence that they surrender to what seems the inevitable, and in due course grow to regard the revolutionary fervour of their youth as a pleasant extravagance, like love-affairs with village maidens. They mistake loss of virility for wisdom, lack of desire for prudence.

-- Compton MacKenzie, The West Wind of Love, p. 122.

Radical education and the medieval question

The scholastics of the middle ages, schooled in the dialectic of their times, were given to beginning their consideration of almost any question with the really basic question: An sit? Does this thing of which we speak really exist? As they moved, ~~with the passage of centuries~~ with the passage of centuries, into the decadence of dogmatic philosophy, the question remained, but was nearly always answered in the affirmative. Nevertheless, the system was not always as dogmatic as it appears. An answer entailed an explanation of the terms of the dispute, in which the question itself was often changed. And there was a fair chance that they knew what they were arguing about.

It is in fact difficult to reach anything like that kind of consensus in education today; to demand it as a condition of discussing radical education raises a number of major questions.

There are, no doubt, utopian theorists who can tell us what a radical project of education ought to be, and perhaps more who can tell us what it ought not to be, but hardly anyone can point to an existing, realized project and say "this is radical education". Most of us are much closer to medieval philosophers talking about God; we can wax eloquent about what it is not, but its existence is not self-evident.

### The mythology of schooling

Everyone knows that education should not be confused with schooling. Yet this confusion is most evident in most writing about education, perhaps because it is in the school, in the bureaucratic institutional structures into which young human beings are obliged to spend much of their time, that the theories of educational thinkers can be inflicted on these young human beings by other human beings who are placed in authority over them. These are controlled by the state to some extent even when they are not funded by the state. Even in the most democratic and liberal societies it is assumed that the state is rightly empowered to establish the purpose of the institution, determine the qualifications of those in charge, decree in detail what happens inside them, and enforce attendance in these institutions for a determined number of years.

Roughly since the end of the eighteenth century it has also been assumed that these authoritarian and bureaucratic institutions can provide, for the purposes of those who control them, an effective control over the hearts and minds of the masses. Curiously enough, this belief coincides roughly with the rise in Western culture of the definition of man as an individual, of a world in which man as individual is the starting point for political and social theory. In the Enlightenment man is finally liberated from the chains of a hierarchical, organic society to become a free, self-reliant individual. Once man is so defined, it becomes imperative that he be subjected to a new institutional control, at the service of the state, and at the service of both political and economic regimes<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically the Church, which remained ideologically committed to the ancien régime through much of the nineteenth century, shared this belief and struggled with the state for control of schools.

This mythology persists. The alternative, we are told, is anarchy.

The belief in the effectiveness of institutional social control is well-established and formulated at the end of the eighteenth century, as for example in Turgot's mémoire on education to Louis XVI. It is spelled out a few years later in Fichte's Addresses to the German Nation. The belief has been remarkably persistent. Whether it really works is another question. But it is believed to work, at least by those in authority<sup>2</sup>.

The mechanisms have been improved. Structures have been established to isolate the individual, to make him or her more vulnerable. Age-specific grouping and the authoritarian role of the teacher enhance the vulnerability of the student and increase his or her dependence on the teacher. Teachers themselves are integrated into a bureaucratic system that tends to ensure conformity. In the province of Nova Scotia, in Canada (and in many other places as well) textbooks are imposed by the bureaucracy with the full authority of the state. In many places, teachers are required to file detailed lesson plans with school authorities. Nothing is supposed to escape the control of the ruling bureaucracy.

This system has to be justified. The inmates, or their parents, must be convinced that all this is done for their own good. Hence the confusion about the purpose of the institution. Historically, the function of social control has always been fundamental on the part of the state, although it is also assumed that the system is justified because of the learning that takes place, or is supposed to take place, within it. There is a constant dialectic that takes place between these functions of the system. Today, in the United States, there is great anxiety about the quality of the learning that takes place in the schools. Yet this is routinely subordinated to other purposes: if all the students learned their lessons well, some of these

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<sup>2</sup> It may not always work as it is intended. A Chilean Communist remarked that they had no need of schools of their own. The Jesuit schools served them remarkably well.

purposes would be frustrated. The sorting machine would cease to function, class structures might be endangered, and people might discover embarrassing things about their societies.

In a word, the school is a bureaucratic institution dedicated to the preservation of the status quo. As an institution, it is inherently conservative.

If then, one persists in confusing education with schooling, the answer to the medieval question must be negative. Radical education does not exist.

### Beyond the school

Fortunately, Fichte's dream of isolating students from all human contact outside the school is impractical. Human beings exist in the context of a multiplicity of human relationships. Children learn from their parents, from other adults, and from other children of all ages. Even in school, they are taught to read, and while what they read in school is carefully controlled, the school has never been able to dictate everything that children read. I have heard that some theorists in California now regard reading as obsolete, but I do not believe it. In a brief autobiographical essay written before his execution, Bartolomeo Vanzetti talks about his own education. As a young man he read Kropotkin, Gorki, Merlino, Malatesta, Reclus, Marx, Leone di Labriola, Pisacane, Mazzini. He read these writers in his twenties; he had left school at the age of thirteen.

Even in the United States, despite the school system, there are poets, and they appear to find some space to survive in. It is true that for the most part they appear to survive in a fairly restricted, self-selected world; the culture as a whole has no passion for poetry, and the mainstream may not regard their space as part of the "real" world. There is a story to the effect that Stalin himself had appended a note to Boris Pasternak's police dossier: "leave this cloudhanger alone". In America, cloudhangers are routinely left alone, since for the most part they are not dangerous.

A project of radical or libertarian education must, I think, find its own space, and on the whole it must find this space outside the formal school systems; these, in so far as it is

possible, have been occupied by the power of the state. This is as true in the United States and Canada as it is in the Soviet Union. It is extremely doubtful whether any modern state, even the most dedicated to "free enterprise" and classical liberalism, would tolerate for a moment a free enterprise or laissez-faire school system. Business élites who lose no opportunity to denounce the iniquities of governmental regulation of the economy accept without demur the minute bureaucratic regulation of schools, and complain of chaos in them. Even in universities, the growth of bureaucratic administration continues unabated<sup>3</sup>.

### Radical theory

There does exist a long tradition of radical theory in education, at times confused, at times contradictory, and, I think, largely ineffectual. The impenetrability of the reigning establishment is due to the fact that it represents in effect the convergence of a great number of vested interests, from the bureaucracy to the large and specialized industries engaged in producing textbooks and educational hardware, plus a large governmental superstructure that operates at all levels. Radical theorists can be and are dissatisfied with the results -- as indeed are many theorists who are anything but radical -- but it is extremely difficult to specify points

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<sup>3</sup> The reasons for this are perhaps a matter of conjecture.

There has been an increase in bureaucratic organization in most sectors of human endeavour. One hypothesis to explain its reception in educational institutions by those who protest against it in government is that for the practising capitalist, education is regarded as an investment. As such, it must be subject to cost-accounting. The results of expenditure should be measurable and measured, and there should be some efficient control of the use of resources. The concept of efficiency has long been applied to the administration of educational institutions, and even to the learning process itself. Monographs have been written on efficiency in the teaching of penmanship, arithmetic, and literature. All this, no doubt, makes it easier for the capitalist to contemplate the opportunity costs of public education. One might also note that while capitalists often complain about bureaucratic controls placed on them by the state, their dislike of bureaucratic organization and controls seldom extends to their own establishments.

demanding reform. The system, if such it be, will give at almost any point. Piecemeal reforms tend in fact to reinforce the system, mobilizing energies and distracting discontent. There has hardly been a time in the past two hundred years -- that is, since the present system began to take shape -- in which a number of major reform movements were not reacting to one or another aspect of the system. Really radical reforms are swallowed whole, sterilized, and become part of the system. Then, of course, they are no longer radical.

One of the principal weaknesses of the system as it exists, which paradoxically becomes one of its greatest strengths, is the systematic refusal to consider seriously the question of purpose. It is like Moses on the mountain: in the presence of Yahweh he covers his face, for no one can look the deity in the face and live. I have heard of a top-level administrator appointed by a reformist provincial government in Canada, who was determined to take a hard and open look at the whole question of purpose in schooling. He lasted four months. Instead there are a great number of aims, goals and objectives which are the subjects of books ground out by the mills of the establishment, but these are all, by definition, limited and partial, so that they do not obviously contradict one another. These are all subject to empirical verification or falsification, thus gaining admittance to the halls of science. Purpose is value-laden and hence illegitimate, and one suspects that it is like bastard children in nineteenth-century bourgeois society: the less said about them the better.

Historically, such reticence was not present. Those who promoted the establishment of school systems had a purpose in mind, and it was moral, not cognitive. While it was expressed in a variety of ways, the common theme is clear. The formation of attitudes takes precedence over the acquisition of skills, and the attitudes desired are those which support the status quo. Thiers, at the mid-century in France, is fairly typical. He wants the schools staffed by people who will teach obedience and morality to the working classes. In the United States, Horace

Mann regarded the school as the "balance wheel of society", and relied for its promotion on an appeal to stability, not learning.

Today, it appears to be unfashionable to discuss purpose, although it is hard to say that anything has changed. If the radical critic complains that there is purpose built into the system, and that this purpose is the perpetuating of economic and political regimes, socialization, the legitimization of class structures, the enforcement of conventional morality, the training of industrial or bureaucratic servants, even to the detriment of "learning", he or she is usually told by the critics of the critics that a) the charges are true but irrelevant; b) they are false but irrelevant; c) they are meaningless, or d) that anarchists should not be taken seriously. If one objects that the system makes learning difficult, the response is that this may be true in some cases, but that socialization is necessary lest society come unglued. If one objects that the socialization process leads to unimaginative conformists who follow their leaders like sheep, the response is that while this is true in some cases, the system is necessary because young people need intellectual or academic skills. In effect, nothing is perfect and one must take the bad with the good.

It is not that much serious critique has not been done. Frustrated students and teachers, at their peril, attack the system from within, and are either expelled or co-opted. Critics from outside fare no better. The fortress appears to be impregnable.

#### What is to be done?

Someone has noted that the real division is not between Left and Right, but between imagination and the lack thereof. To this, as a matter of survival, one must add humour. I do not mean a humour of despair. Imagination and humour are valuable resources for those who are -- and we all are to some extent -- caught up in the system. They who refuse to take the

system seriously, who refuse to allow themselves to be defined by it, are thereby the better equipped to educate themselves, and ultimately, all education is self-education. Those who have the imagination to perceive that schooling is not education should be equipped not only to understand the radical critique, but to profit from it. The system as a whole is sufficiently mindless so that those who know what they want can probably get it. If a young human being wants to learn maths, or language skills, or almost anything else that is supposedly taught, he can probably do it, particularly if he or she is perceptive enough to realize that this is deviant behaviour.

Admittedly this is a hard saying. It punishes those who are caught by the dream, or who take the system seriously, who believe the promise of social mobility or serious education, and it probably rewards cynics as well as clear-sighted people who have a sense of humour. Yet one cannot avoid the impression that the situation is one of saue qui peut. People who have themselves together and are willing to sabotage the basic purpose of the institution by acting as if this purpose were learning have a fair chance of getting away with their bluff, because most educational bureaucrats are unwilling to admit that learning is the last thing with which the system is concerned. A few of them -- and there are some in every system -- may have enough humour to understand what is happening, and if they do, they are often capable of aiding and abetting in the subversion of the system. Mere institutional reform is, I think, doomed to failure. The radical critics have, for the most part, seen this, and accept it. Humour and imagination are absolutely essential for the radical. The alternative is madness.