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Useful reading

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Part One

Work and education in primitive societies

Human beings evolved in groups that were tiny in comparison with modern villages in Britain today. Since they depended on gathering food and hunting they were for long periods nomadic, moving according to the seasons and to the migrations of the herds on which they depended for food and clothing. The education of children could not be delegated to specialists - it had to take place in the living context of the group at work and at play.

When food was plentiful and the men did not have to be away hunting for days they would share in the care of the young children and in the work around the village, making or repairing shelters, making hunting weapons and teaching the boys to interpret weather signs.

For women pregnancy would be a common state as infant mortality was high. That and the care of infants would prevent them having to trek over long distances in search of food, except when the group moved to a new site. Even when the later development of agriculture and farming led to more geographical stability, frequent pregnancy would tend to make the women specialise in the domestic arts, including gardening, cookery, medicine and the education of infants. All children would become familiar with those arts since they would be expected to help the women according to their age and capacity.

The youngest children, breast-fed of necessity for far longer than is customary in our culture, remained close to their mothers and surrounded by other women and girls (and men and boys when they were not hunting) as they went about their work of gathering food, brewing, making pots, weaving, painting, making magic or singing and talking - as still happens in many non-industrial societies today.

Because they lived in one large round hut like the Round House of the Iron Age, or in the close assembly of smaller huts as in an African compound, the care of children was communal, the nearest adult or older child attending to the immediate needs for food, drink or solace - as tends to happen today when a group of parents jointly runs a play group. This pattern of care would be in contrast to that exercised by the modern housewife, isolated for much of the day on a housing estate with only the company of her youngest child. The 'primitive' children would be constantly surrounded by speech directly relevant to the work in hand - a factor essential to the growth of intelligence.

Education was obviously necessary to perpetuate the knowledge and skills required for survival. It had to be incidental to normal work since the pace and intensity of that work depended on the seasons and would vary from day to day or month to month especially in a changeable climate. At any one time the number of infants, i.e. those too young to produce enough goods or services to support themselves, were always a small proportion of the total group, so instruction in any skill would normally be individual or to a group of not more than three or four; much of the elementary instruction would be given by older children.

This relationship between work and education remained so long as productivity depended on manpower, animal power or the power of wind or water harnessed by simple machines. It operated from the time when human beings emerged as a distinct social species until less than two hundred years ago - a period during which speech appeared and transformed the difference between them and animals. Speech rendered the process of evolution itself less subject to mere chance, by the power it provided for people to change their environment through, for example, selective breeding of animals and crops.

It was under conditions like those outlined above - during a period of some fifteen million years - that the human brain evolved to its present size and complexity and, according to the evidence of prehistoric artefacts, displayed a sensitivity and intelligence that we today feel as our own.

Speech

The point at which people became distinct from animals is most usefully indicated by the emergence of speech, speech being defined as a system of vocal symbols socially structured to convey meaning. Sounds associated with meaning are uttered by many species but the range of meaning is normally restricted to fear, rage, alarm or parental reassurance to the young. Variations from this include the territorial songs of birds and the dawn chorus or whale 'songs' which serve to reestablish contact between members of very volatile groups. Human vocal sounds are used for these purposes too, but are also used to indicate objects and events outside the speaker.

The human brain, superficially similar to that of the higher apes, differs in having a larger associative cortex in proportion to the older sensimotor cortex, the function of the former being to bring together into association stimuli originating in sensory experiences of different kinds, and to produce symbols or socially agreed referents to those experiences. These referents can then become, as sounds, visual or tactile signals, forms of experience themselves. Sounds uttered in the context of action can be used to symbolise those actions as words.

Pavlov described speech as 'the second signal system,' the 'first signal system' being the actual sight, sound, smell, feel or taste or the object. So the word 'tiger' in certain contexts can produce the same feeling of panic as the actual sight or sound of the animal. Because of this power to recall experience, speech, together with all the other systems of symbols that have been invented - writing, music, dancing, painting - makes possible memory, history and eventually all that goes to make human culture.

It is important to realise that the word as symbol is part of the social context in which the adult or adults are working, handling tools or materials and talking about what they are doing, either incidentally or in the form of specific instruction to the child. It is the association of the word with the action or object that provides the 'meaning' of the symbol.

Children educated in this way - through the coordination of activity and speech, find little difficulty in absorbing most complicated procedures and out of a multiplicity of concrete experiences coordinated with language, forming abstractions that derive from the common elements in those experiences. In this way, as Piaget has shown, children develop skill in abstract thought or 'intelligence'. Attempts to force children to think abstractly by getting them to manipulate symbols before they have had the range of sensory experience that lies behind those symbols will confuse them and actually delay or even impede their capacity to handle abstractions with ease.

Other desirable consequences follow from the education of children through participation in work undertaken by groups. First there is an inbuilt corrective mechanism at work; any faulty description of an object or process or any misconception about function on the part of the adult instructing the child would be corrected by the other adults - a feature rarely present in modern education. Second, any idiosyncrasy of character or behaviour towards a child would, if seen to be harmful, be corrected by the others. In the modern nuclear family of 2.3 children cooped up with their parents during their leisure hours children can become burdened with the personal hangups of the parents to the point when they may be more or less handicapped for the rest of their lives. This does not seem to happen under systems of group living. From personal experience I know that my West Indian and African friends who had been brought up in compounds or close communities show a buoyancy, independence of thought and relaxation about sexual and personal relationships and a general level of vitality that my British and European friends envy. Their attitude to old people is more loving because no single adult could dominate their lives as they can with us.

A third consequence is of importance not only to the psychic health of the individual but to the cohesion and survival of the group. Because the child grows up among a group of people who have nourished, protected and educated her, she is bound to them by multiple ties of affection, interest and a deep sense of identity. The social structures that emerge in such groups may have some of the outward trappings of class divisions but they lack the gross exploitation to which western industrialised societies have inured. As Bruno Bettelheim showed in his study of children in the Israeli kibbutzim, Children of the Dream, children brought up together in this way develop such close bonds that in time of danger or war they readily risk or even sacrifice their lives for the group or for any of its members - a fact that was commonly noted by British Army commanders when opposed by 'the natives' during the nineteenth century imperialist wars.

In such societies the education of children is a well-integrated totality, growing naturally from the close, intimate care of the infant by the group of women, through the gradually extending circle of observation and participation in work and play, to the full and responsible role of the adult member of the group. The core of that education is the community itself and its daily work. With the exception of particular ceremonies associated with initiation to womanhood or manhood, every child has the full range of his own culture available. Each acquires a breadth of knowledge, skill and sensitivity that is co-extensive with the whole culture - a thing that cannot be said for our modern industrialised cultures where class, occupational and educational divisions cut off large areas of activity and sensitivity from every child.

The speech of such societies reflects their cohesion. Whereas in societies riven by class and occupational divisions speech usage intimately reflects those divisions, in the types of society referred to above, language both reflects and reinforces their integrity.

To claim all this is not, of course, to pretend that many of the customs, beliefs and habits of many groups were such as we could tolerate. Cannibalism, female circumcision, bodily disfigurement, cruel initiation ceremonies, the murder of female babies and the exclusion of women from decision making have all, collectively or individually, appeared in groups that otherwise seemed free of social strife and were generally solicitous of the welfare of all their members.

Under simpler conditions the adults know intimately what the child is able to do and what he can understand because he is in constant touch with them as they are with one another: factual knowledge and understanding go hand-in-hand. Today in school the child is too often saturated with masses of facts to be learned by heart. How far they will become part of his understanding will remain a matter of chance.

Part Two

Pre-Industrial Britain

Work

Before the Industrial Revolution patterns of work were dictated by the seasons and by the culture of crops and the care of animals. Periods of intense activity in spring and autumn alternated with quieter summers and winters. The pagan festivals marking and celebrating the progress of the year had been absorbed into the Christian calendar. A technology based on manpower, animal power and the power of wind and water produced enough food and materials to tide over until the following year. Late frosts or prolonged droughts could mean hunger or even famine, and there were few safeguards against such disasters as a plague.

Villages and most towns were small enough for everyone to know everyone else from infancy by their first name - until late in the eighteenth century they had no second name other than that of their birthplace or the craft they practised - and most people died where they had been born, a fact borne out by the evidence of tombstones and parish registers. Neighbours cooperated to plough, harrow, seed and gather the harvest or to build a cottage or a barn. Good times and bad were shared; only thus could the poor, viz. the mass of the people, survive. From my own personal experience in a small village in the south of Ireland during and after the first World War I can vouch that many of these conditions survived into the twentieth century in more remote areas of the British Isles.

Such conditions induced a state of mind and a set of values that was wary of innovation, wedded to old and tried traditions, generous and loyal to friends and neighbours, modest in consumption and careful of tools, materials and the environment. People survived directly on their knowledge and skill and so were disciplined and far-sighted in planning and effort. Because many of the conditions were similar to those in so-called 'primitive' societies, they fostered similar attitudes and values. I recall the similarities that I found between my own childhood experiences and those of children in my London school who had been brought up in Cypriot villages. These children consistently displayed levels of practical intelligence well above average and qualities of generosity, responsiveness and initiative well above average. So the reputation that Englishmen held for love of good craftsmanship, for ingenuity, for loyalty and for fearlessness in stating and holding to a point of view was not specific to Englishmen: it derived from social conditions of a particular kind.

Education

Formal education was restricted to the children of the upper classes destined for careers in the Church or the State, and was largely carried out by private tutors at home or by clerics. Grammar schools or 'scholes of grammere and song' had been founded by kings and bishops from the time of Alfred to ensure a supply of trained candidates for the Church and the newly-emerging Civil Service.

The bulk of the population educated their own children at home and at work by incorporating their young energies into whatever work had to be done. Craftsmanship was passed from father to son and mother to daughter. The education of the child of the commoner, as for the child of the statesman, was for work. For the child of the statesman, Latin was at the core of the curriculum because Latin was the international language of politics and law.

Part Three

The Industrial Period

Work

Within a few decades the Enclosure Acts, the application of steam power to agriculture and the building of factories in the new towns swept the working classes off the land and into the towns in search of work. The story of the overcrowding, the lack of hygiene, the squalor and the depravity that were created by the greedy exploitation of the poor has been too well documented to need repetition here. What has not been so fully explored was the change in the general psyche of the countryman and woman caused by degrading conditions of work and housing and by the switch from patterns of work founded on felt social need and applied with reason, to patterns of work dictated by the drive for profit and regulated by the machine rather than by human need.

The first massive change was that from work patterns determined by the regular rhythms of the seasons and the regular variations in the amount of daylight, to those fixed by the mill owner intent on keeping his mills working for as long as possible every day in order to make as much profit as he could. Because he could lengthen the working day with artificial light he could impose in winter a working day as long as that in summer. The varying patterns of work within the day characteristic of the agricultural pattern - herding, feeding, milking, harnessing, ploughing, watering - gave way to the fixed and mechanical repetition of actions that had to accord exactly with the motions of the machine. Men and women and very young children had to become, in effect, 'appendages to machines'.

This mechanisation of labour eliminated the need for thought and judgement by the worker. The country worker had to deal with a number of varying factors in his work, such as season, weather, crop, type of animal, availability of raw materials and so on. His decisions were reached jointly with others since so much work could only be done with the help of others and since they were all, to greater or lesser extents, concerned with the outcome.

In this sense, and in the sense used by both Marx and Dewey, work was also education, the growing-point of culture: it was a praxis or the continuous interplay of practice and theory. The modern machine-minder, whether in the factory or on the land, is isolated by the sub-division of labour and the greater productivity of the power under his control. Decisions about his work are taken by others who are often quite remote. He has no say in the organisation of his work or in the disposal of what he produces. The tractor driver on a big farm often works alone for days or weeks on end. He is as isolated from his fellow workers as the men on the production line of a car factory. He can only talk with others during breaks or in his leisure time. At work he has become as anonymous as the standardised products he turns out.

But the social consequences of these changes are also damaging. Where work is done together for purposes held in common the individuals feel enriched both in the process and in the result. The work, if it is tedious, can be enlivened by conversation or song; where it is novel or difficult it can be eased by explanation. The factory or mill workers spent twelve or fourteen hours a day at their machines and returned to their overcrowded and often insanitary back-to-backs with little energy to do anything but eat and sleep. All the leisure activities of the old village life - fishing, poaching, collecting herbs, gardening, bee-keeping or brewing - were no longer available. In the evenings they could go to the tavern and on Sunday, their one free day, they could go to chapel or walk in the country which had now become not the living context of their every waking hour but something remote in space and function from their daily work.

Social reformers there were in plenty but they had no power to control the rapacity of the new generation of employers until the scandal caused by the condition of the poor reached national proportions and forced Parliament to pass the Factory Acts. It was during the period leading up to those Acts - a period of squalor, degradation and brutality that we now associate only with apartheid and other forms of fascist oppression - that the once independent spirit of the labouring poor was beaten into servility. When desperate workers tried by collective action to improve their wages or conditions of work the landowners and factory owners, as magistrates, fined, imprisoned or deported them. The most peaceful meetings were dispersed by the military.

Poverty, fear of unemployment, malnutrition and disease steadily killed the natural altruism that had bound the village communities together under even the most difficult conditions, and created the anxious self-interest and materialism that is the hall-mark of workers under capitalism. Meagre wages for men forced women into factories leaving their babies with old, crippled or pregnant women who could not work, so, for the youngest child the vital links between care, speech, work and education was snapped. Older children were either at work that had no value as education or they were running wild.

Schooling

A powerful drive behind the passing of the Education Act of 1870 was the fear of the revolutionary movements on the Continent spreading to this country. Schools for the poor had been built very early in the nineteenth century by the Church with the object of teaching children to read so that they might read the Bible and be saved. Shrewd observers noticed that children so schooled were more amenable and 'well-behaved' than those who had run wild. The docility they displayed was exactly what the factory owners wanted of their work force. They began to press for all children to attend school: the move to compulsory and universal education rested on economic and political foundations.

New forms of production required not only new forms of organisation but new attitudes to authority on the part of the workers. The old schools had been seen to produce obedience, punctuality and docility, so they could be used as training grounds for the habits and virtues required of an easily controlled labour force. It is not surprising that the School Boards approached the problems of school design with the concept of the factory firmly in mind: the processing of raw materials to predetermined standards. Factories had machines set out in ranks and files: the first impact of the school on the observer is of a building with desks set out in rows and files. School organisation, content and methods reflected the new work methods and relationships. Knowledge was subdivided into subjects, stages and grades and was frequently tested - a form of 'quality control'. Instead of hooters, whistles blew or bells rang to mark the beginning and end of each period; the teacher surveyed his pupils from a dais, issued commands and delegated authority to monitors who were trained, like future foremen and women, to exercise minor responsibilities such as giving out pens and ink, collecting and even marking work and generally preparing the classroom for the teacher and tidying up after the lesson.

Children were marshalled into and out of the school, waiting in lines and being called forward by numbers; registers were marked and punishment given for absence or lateness - the forerunner of 'clocking-in' where lateness or absence automatically reduces pay. Everything in school was modelled on some part of the system of mass production, even so far as to attempt to standardise the selection of ability in groups of children being taught together - later more systematically applied as 'standardised tests of intelligence'.

Moral education centred on ideas of unquestioning obedience, punctuality, regularity, modesty and respect for authority. Children were made to feel guilty for loss of time or waste of materials; theft and disobedience were major sins to be punished by the fires of hell. Religion was invoked to justify such conditioning of future workers. The sense of guilt, which paralleled what was being preached in the chapels to which most of the workers went, was fostered in school to the highest degree because it had the effect of convincing pupils that authority, whether of the teacher, the boss, the local council or the Crown, must be right, must derive from God, so that rebellion must be the gravest of sins. Power had to be seen to rest with authority so the cane came to be the symbol of education: its shadow still obscures the light.

The 'hidden curriculum' of conditioning the young for servitude permeated the content of lessons. History was the history of kings and queens, battles and conquest; geography revolved around the idea of an empire on which the sun never set; literacy and numeracy focussed on handwriting in copperplate, the endless totting up of bills, the correspondence and the learning by heart of poems and stories intended to encourage to virtue and to dissuade from depravity. Physical 'jerks' or Swedish drill was used to get pupils into the habit of keeping fit for work rather than from enjoyment through games and for love of the open air. Then, as now, the image of royalty was that of a military or naval commander and the national anthem was associated with all public functions to condition the association of the ruling class with power.

In The Mass Psychology of Fascism Wilhelm Reich describes in detail how the young in capitalist societies are made to have a 'fascist character-structure'. Just as the fasces of the Roman lictors were held in place by the straps bound round them, so the coherence of the individual character or personality is made to depend on the forms of external authority that give shape and direction to individual impulses. By bringing children up in an environment made for the convenience of the manufacturing process; by surrounding them with dangerous machines like gas cookers, electric cookers, washing machines, power points, accessible windows in high blocks, toxic substances and fast traffic, we force the adults to exercise close and constant supervision over the children for their safety. This contrasts with the freedom of the village and the village green where all children were well known to all adults.

In the modern town or city the child finds few outlets for his natural curiosity that are not thwarted by the anxiety of the parent or teacher. He concludes that he can only engage in action if the adult consents. In time, especially when he has been punished for not heeding adult advice, he comes to doubt the validity of his own impulses; he must be wicked by nature since adults have so often to control or punish him. In the long run since he cannot beat them he joins them, as Freud so clearly shows in 'the internalisation of the parent'. The strength of authority springs from fear of punishment and doubt about one's own worth.

The association of fear with a authority thus brings about the most effective form of control - internal control - for the purposes of authority. Only thus can you produce people who will not rebel against degrading or inhuman conditions. A few may try to do so, but because they are a few they can easily be brought under control by more severe punishment or, in the last resort, by incarcerating them in mental hospitals and so institutionalising what hitherto they had experienced only as a secret doubt - the fear that they might be 'mad' because they so often had the desire to rebel. When internal control can be brought about by early conditioning then external force has to be used only in emergency, hence the popularity among educational psychologists of B.F. Skinner's theories of 'operant conditioning' in colleges of education.

Schools today have changed from their Victorian counterparts only in minor details. Essentially their function remains, for the bulk of the population, what it was from the beginning - to train the young into desirable work habits or, failing that, to contain them and keep them out of the labour market as long as possible since automation steadily reduces the number of workers needed to produce a given volume of commodities. That the schools find their task more and more difficult is not for want of trying. Other agencies more powerful than school - radio, television, youth culture - have appeared and raised doubts about our national assumptions. New attitudes to child-rearing, following on the spread of Freudian ideas, have changed many of our attitudes to authority. Teachers, selected because they have shown themselves to be traditionalist in values and behaviour, have been unable to make clear the true relationship of education to society and too often flounder into a slack 'permissiveness' that they mistake for 'progressiveness' or 'democracy'; or they retreat into authoritarianism and provoke rebellion from their pupils.

Part Four

Looking for a Way Out

Progressive Schools

It was in protest against the dehumanising function of school that the progressive school movement started in Britain in the early twenties, following growing familiarity with Freud's ideas. A.S. Neill started Summerhill and Dora Russell started Beacon Hill to create small communities where sex repression could be obviated, the child's confidence and freedom to express his true feelings fostered, a wide range of interests encouraged and punishment as an incentive rejected. Susan Isaacs started The Malting House with similar objectives. All three schools were small; Summerhill at its largest just exceeded seventy, so they were able to maintain something of the atmosphere of a family.

An important difference between Summerhill and the others was that while Dora and Susan set out deliberately to teach through art, drama, literature and the keeping of small animals, and the discussion of problems and topics arising incidentally, as happens in a normal family, Neill, although providing teachers and classrooms for different subjects, brought no pressure on children to attend lessons. He set great store by the Saturday evening meeting and the various tribunals set up by the children to deal with breaches of laws made by the whole community, because he wished to dispel traditional fear of authority and restore it to its rational place as the collective will in which all had shared.

There was always pressure from some parents on Neill to put children in for examinations. So long as he lived he resisted that pressure. After his death Summerhill entered pupils for state examinations as other schools did, so far as I know, bringing pressure to bear on pupils to attend lessons.

Progressive schools are available only to those who can pay the fees; they are, therefore, limited effectively to the upper class or "one of its subcultures (the creative, permissive intelligentsia)" as Royston Lambert writes of Dartington Hall School. As boarding schools they isolate their pupils from the real world even more effectively than do day schools. Maurice Punch's book Progressive Retreat is a critique of Dartington up to the end of the period when Bill Curry was Head. It was written at a time when we began to realise that any form of progressive education that could not apply to ordinary children was a misdirection of effort.

Dr. Royston Lambert, the Cambridge sociologist who had undertaken research for the second Newsom Report on the possible integration of the private school system with the state system, was appointed by the Dartington Trustees as Head of the school to give effect to his recommendations. Among his many experiments seeking to link Dartington with schools in working-class areas was a scheme to exchange pupils with Northcliffe School, an ordinary state school in Conisbrough, Yorkshire (see: An Experiment in Progressive Education in a State School by M. Duane, M. Phil. Thesis Nottingham Univ. 1977). Although the school was brilliantly successful in raising the consciousness and the confidence of the pupils from the secondary school, it was abandoned, ostensibly for economic reasons, but, on the evidence of some adults directly concerned with the scheme and of some Dartington parents, at least in part because it was a political 'hot potato'. The statement by both the Doncaster Education Authority and the Dartington Trustees to the effect that the scheme was too expensive to continue in its original form was, in effect, equivalent to saying, "We are not ready for children of the working classes to be treated like children of the elite. We cannot contemplate the prospect of the widespread social change that would result from such assumptions realised on a national scale." Just as Neill preached sexual freedom for adolescents but could not allow it in practice in Summerhill because the school would be closed instantly by the DES, so progressive education may preach that we treat pupils democratically but is instantly prevented from putting that belief into practice, should it start to do so.

Free Schools

If the progressive schools gain in the freedom and self-confidence of their pupils they do so at the expense of isolating them, even more than state schools, from the ordinary world of home, work and neighbourhood for long stretches at a time. The Free Schools for Neill signified an important break with the old assumption that progressive education was OK for middle-class children (an opinion voiced to me by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors when he visited Howe Dell School, a secondary modern school in rural Hertfordshire), but not for children of working-class parents. Neill's original inspiration had come from Homer Lane whose Little Commonwealth at Monkton Wyld in Dorset was run for working-class youngsters who had been sent to him from the Courts rather than to Borstal.

Where the Free schools have a philosophy it tends to call on Paul Goodman, Paulo Freire and others, notably Illich, advocating alternative forms of social organisation. But in America George Dennison opened his First Street Free School and in Britain John Ord opened his Liverpool Free School in response to the many children truanting from State schools because they found them hostile and oppressive. In 1965 the then Education Officer of the Inner London Education Authority asked me to give him some suggestions for what to do with the many pupils who were roaming the streets of London during school hours because they had been 'expelled' by their secondary schools for disruptive behaviour. On the basis of the suggestions which I and others made, the ILEA formed a number of units which later became known as 'truancy centres' or 'sin bins' to which schools could send pupils whom they could not manage.

The aim of these centres was to enable small groups of pupils to work with more sympathetic teachers in a less formal atmosphere, to gain the confidence of even the least cooperative and to return them eventually to school for the last few weeks so that they might end their compulsory school period with a reasonably good report and so have a better chance of finding employment.

The failure of such solutions to touch more than a minute part of the problems facing schools lies in the assumption that the children they deal with are somehow rare 'exceptions' to an otherwise well-functioning system, with the consequent refusal even to recognise that a deep-seated and extensive malaise permeates our society, a malaise that appears under different aspects as crime, drug addiction, absenteeism and the many stress illnesses that we seem unable to obviate.

Over a period of more than eight years the A.S. Neill Trust and Association, formed to foster the idea of greater freedom for children and more say for them in their own education, has found many of its members among those who work in Free schools. Active discussion of the place and fruition of Free schools has taken up many hours, but conclusions have tended to remain at very abstract levels.

A paper, written by one of the Bezugspersonen ('people who are important in the child's life') from the Frankfurt Free school, expresses many of the problems and dilemmas voiced at ASNTA meetings. After visiting a number of progressive and Free schools in Britain he wrote:

"they are all adult-dominated or at least predetermine the children's decisions for them.

"They mainly reduce the idea of freedom to the freedom of choice between different offers ... The kids can choose between maths and English and woodwork. In White Lion (School) they can refuse to do 'anything' (of course, they want to do something and everybody is doing lots of things the whole day through. But it might be 'just hanging around or playing around'). It is not the young person's own active wish. It is the reaction to what is on offer.

"The question 'What is life about?' is already answered! It is: growing up, being socialised into the adults' world. The child's freedom is the freedom to choose her or his own way to a destination already fixed by the adults.

"Each of these schools offers much more freedom than any state school could do ... Sometimes, when a lot of fighting is going on in Frankfurt Free School (between kids, Bezugspersonen and parents), I wonder whether I wouldn't prefer the nice, smooth atmosphere of Kirkdale School. But in the end I stick to Frankfurt thinking that the other schools are 'adult-schools', whilst Frankfurt is a 'children-school'."

The Free school teachers with whom I have discussed the Frankfurt paper agree that we too often turn a blind eye to the sense of aimlessness that seems easily to pervade a Free school if it is not organised by adults so as to occupy most of the pupils' time. The paper continues, after describing how things were done in the early days of the school - projects, visits, classes in English - set up in response to the demands of the children:

"The problem that appeared after doing things in this way for more than five years was that only very few things happen with continuity. Things started and then petered out. Projects which needed concentration over a longer period of time were very rarely finished. The school day was dominated by activities which it was possible to do spontaneously such as playing games, roller-skating, soccer, reading or telling stories."

The Frankfurt paper highlights the problem of how, under school conditions, to maintain genuine freedom for children while ensuring that they become literate, socially sensitive and skilful in a wide range of skills. In the Free schools, as in Summer-hill and the rest, children develop much strength of character and the ability to be clear about their own responsibility in making decisions affecting their lives.

Free schools in Britain suffer from many restrictions: they have to raise funds, fight off Local Education Authorities and find teachers who not only sympathise with their aims but are mature and qualified enough to give something of value; they also are expected to work for little or nothing. They mostly operate in the poorest parts of our cities where parents may have little time, even if they desire, actively to cooperate in the work of the schools.

For these and other reasons Free schools have appeared like mushrooms and as quickly died away. A very few have survived for more than a few years simply because the adults have been deeply committed to the fostering of free spirits.

Progressive ideas in state schools

It is commonly claimed by politicians and administrators that progressive ideas already operate within state schools and that, for example, caning has virtually died out as a result of the work of heads and teachers. That caning was diminishing in middle-class areas because middle-class parents were uneasy about it is certainly true. But the experience of those like Bob Mackenzie in Braehead School and in the ironically named Summerhill Academy, makes it clear that it was still flourishing in schools in working class areas. 'Was', since the pressures brought to bear by STOPP - the Society of Teachers and Parents Opposed to Physical Punishment - have come to a critical point with their support of parents who have taken their objections to caning to the International Court at The Hague and received favourable verdicts from that Court. Now Local Education Authorities are moving to outlaw the cane in all schools or have undertaken to do so in the near future.

Without going into a philosophical analysis of what is meant by 'freedom' and accepting, with A.S. Neill, as a practical formulation for everyday purposes, that there is an important difference between 'freedom' and 'licence' - the former meaning 'having the power to act or think according to one's own will or choice', and

the latter, 'acting without regard to the feelings or rights of others' - it is clear that state schools cannot permit children to be free in the sense in which Neill used it. State schools exist to create young citizens modelled on the prevailing criteria of what is acceptable in matters of belief and behaviour.

In a society fragmented by wealth and class state schools would not, could not educate children to believe, for example, that all men are equal or that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. Especially if the schools impressed on the children that belief without action is hypocrisy. Of course such doctrines are preached and taught in schools but the actual practice that we live by is seen to contradict the belief. The fact that there are different types of school for the lower classes, for the middle-classes and for the upper classes - comprehensives, grammar schools and public schools - which are staffed and equipped to prepare their pupils for those social roles, is a daily denial of both the democratic and the Christian message. Sociological research over the last twenty years has clarified with massive detail the different social roles of our different types of school.

Freedom for children - illusory or feasible?

What do we mean by 'freedom' in the context of schools? Is it enough to say that we are free when we can choose to act or not at will? There are many aspects to the concept of freedom, such as 'absence of restraint', 'power and skills to act', 'a context relevant to the action', 'the question of consequences in action' ...

A young child can exercise freedom to the extent that he can envisage an objective, has the physical power and skills to attain it and is aware of the more obvious consequences of his action, including the reactions of others.

Because we know that the child's ability to foresee consequences is limited either by his stage of development or by lack of experience, we take care to provide an environment that is safe. The absence of restraint that allows the adolescent safely to cross a busy street could be fatal if applied to a three-year-old. But because we also know that the child is growing in both power and understanding with experience, we take care to withdraw restrictions gradually and to provide a wider range of experiences on which to exercise his burgeoning strength and intelligence. The playpen may be necessary at the crawling stage but is likely to be harmful to the child who can walk with ease. A pass to the Reading Room of the British Museum would be useless to a five-year-old but could be an 'Open Sesame' to some adolescents.

As social beings we live fully and harmoniously to the extent that we are in constant communication with those around us and are aware of their wants and needs as we are of our own - what Illich describes as 'conviviality'. Schooling that does not provide experiences that will develop sensitivity to others along with awareness of self is grossly deficient.

Summerhill was frequently denounced, mostly by those who had never visited the school, as a 'Do as you please' school - despite Neill's reiterated distinction between freedom and licence. My own first visit to the school in the late forties made further reading of Neill's books superfluous, though I have read them all.

In all the many Meetings that I attended over a period of twenty years the agenda were made by the pupils. Most items were complaints by individuals that others had bullied them or their friends, stolen or borrowed their personal possessions or disturbed their privacy or sleep. The ensuing discussion made it clear to the culprit how others reacted to his behaviour and, because it came from his peers, it seemed to have much more force than rebukes given by teachers to pupils in conventional schools. Sometimes the Meeting upheld the case of the defendant when it was discovered that the complainant was lying, acting with malice or distorting the behaviour of the defendant for his own ends. Sometimes complaints were made by the Staff and were dealt with in exactly the same way as they would have been if raised by pupils.

Some opponents of progressive education have argued that it is unrealistic to give children responsibility that belongs to adults. Neill was clear about where boundaries lay. Pupils could not decide whether or not the school should pay the rates imposed by the County Council. They understood that there were some things not in their power to change, as when they found, in Wales, that their customary games of hockey on Sunday morning would offend their chapel-going neighbours, they simply decided to play on another day. Or as when they were wiring a barn for a school play and Neill told them that he could not have the barn insured against fire unless they used wire of a heavier gauge, they just accepted it as fact beyond their control and used wire to suit. So the concept of freedom requires, as Engels pointed out, 'the recognition of necessity'; the recognition that there may be, at the time of having to make a decision, some things that cannot then be changed, even if it might be possible later to work to bring about change.

Part Five

Some Criticisms of Schooling

Any criticism of schooling must bear in mind not only the organisation, methods of teaching and curricula of schools but their function in relation to society as a whole. In this paper I have not dealt in detail with the manner in which different social classes are schooled in different types of institution - comprehensives, grammar and Public schools. More than twenty years of research have shown how this is done in great detail.

We also have to bear in mind the learner - hitherto almost universally regarded as wax or putty to be moulded according to what the decision-makers, or the ruling classes, find to be in their best interests. Attitudes to children have changed since the war, as a result of the spread of Freudian ideas about the effects of early training and the growing demand for more democratic participation by the 'lower classes' and by women. Educational debate is riven by arguments between geneticists and environmentalists, traditionalists and progressives, believers in God and believers in Man. At the core of the arguments is a huge political crisis about

the very nature of the society we want. Each side holds spoken or unspoken assumptions about the form it should take.

I believe that we are entering what may be a final struggle, not so much between Left and Right - there are too many protagonists on each side who are indistinguishable from those on the other side - as between different views of the nature of Man. The argument on one side is for widespread dispersal of wealth and power from the centre to smaller and more autonomous areas. Under such a development institutions hitherto associated with the control of power by small elites - banks, police, the Forces - would be replaced by centres of communication and resources easily accessible to all.

The alternative is an acceleration of the process whereby power, wealth and control moves into the hands of smaller groups linked to similar groups in other countries and modelled on existing systems operated by multinational corporations in the interests of a cohering international elite. In such a development the system of education would reflect the change, schooling for the masses being intensified in the direction of operant-conditioning based on reward for conformity rather than punishment for non-conformity.

My own conviction - if we can avoid the danger of mushrooming wars throughout the world leading to nuclear war - is that we shall move towards a greater dispersal of wealth and power, so I write in hope, however tenuous that may seem in the context of the Thatcher government's determination to destroy the trade unions piecemeal.

The first criticism of schools is that they segregate children into buildings remote from the processes of work and the human speech and activity incidental to that work. In consequence they do not develop an adequate awareness of the complex interdependencies between different forms of work and between different people. They have to submit to a process of forcefeeding of streams of facts which are academic abstractions divorced from the real activities from which they derive. For eleven years or more children sit for many hours every schoolday to undergo what is a distortion of mind and body that has become, apparently, a permanent feature of western schooling.

I remember showing a sound and colour film about iron founding to a group of boys. They seemed interested and sat for nearly an hour watching the film. As I watched with them I recalled the time when, as a small boy in southern Ireland, I would stand for hours watching the blacksmith at work. When work was slack he would teach me how to heat the iron to a white heat and then pound it on the anvil. My memory is compounded of heat, flickering light, dull thumping sounds and sounds as clear as bells; of smells of the fire, of sweat and sizzling horn; of glistening muscles, swinging body, hard breathing and the grunt of effort. I can recall in clear detail every step of the process because I learned with all my senses and through my own activity.

The boys to whom I showed the film retained a generalised impression immediately afterwards. A week later the bright images had all but disappeared and they could not recall the order of events.

In reflecting further on this event I remembered the various ways in which I had been drawn into the work of my grandfather's small farm; how I picked up the many skills to do with the handling of horses, the care of animals and the use of machinery. I saw the discipline of work not as an unpleasant adjunct to the task but as an intrinsic part of the relationships between agents, means and ends.

John Dewey in The School and Society writes:

"(There was a time) when the household was practically the centre in which were carried on, or about which were clustered, all the typical forms of industrial occupation. The clothing was for the most part made in the house; the members of the household were usually familiar also with the shearing of the sheep, the carding and spinning of the wool, and the plying of the loom ... The supply of flour, lumber, of foods, of building material ... was produced in the immediate neighbourhood ... The entire industrial process stood revealed, from the production on the farm of the raw materials till the finished article was actually put to use ... The children, as they gained in strength and capacity, were gradually initiated into the mysteries of the several processes ...

We cannot overlook the factors of discipline and character-building involved in this kind of life: training in habits of order and of industry, and in the idea of responsibility, of obligation to do something, to produce something, in the world. There was always something which really needed to be done, and a real necessity that each member of the household should do his own part faithfully and in cooperation with others. Personalities which became effective in action were bred and tested in the medium of action. Again, we cannot overlook the importance for educational purposes of the close and intimate acquaintance got with nature at first hand, with real things and materials, with the actual processes of their manipulation, and the knowledge of their social necessities and uses ... Verbal memory can be trained in committing tasks, a certain discipline of the reasoning powers can be acquired through lessons in science and mathematics; but, after all, this is somewhat remote and shadowy compared with the training of attention and of judgement that is required in having to do things with a real motive behind and a real outcome ahead."

When children grow and learn under such conditions they display qualities of reason and foresight and a lively intelligence that can rarely be seen under conventional school conditions. Conventional schooling, except for the fortunate few whose homes provide opportunities for action and learning, steadily stultifies natural curiosity and induces a feeling of helplessness in the face of authority. Those who pass 'standardised tests of intelligence and achievement' and public examinations are permitted to go on and learn more. Those who fail learn the 'salutory' lesson that they must not value their own power or ability to the point of criticising the system of teaching, or taking initiative of their own. It is when the system of schooling has succeeded in inducing such

self-derogatory feelings that it has indeed succeeded in its purpose of preparing the 'lower orders' for their role in a class-structured society.

Both Marx and Dewey saw work and the human relations that developed around work as the growing point of culture. William Morris in The Factory as it Might Be (1866) came to a similar conclusion. All three saw it as a powerful medium of education, but the crucial difference between work as they envisaged it and the work that has come to be the norm under either capitalism or state-capitalism is that the latter is done for profit and organised, not by those who do the work but by those who own the tools and the materials; whereas the former is work done for the satisfaction of need by those who both own and control and tools and organise the work themselves.

A second criticism of schools follows directly from this point, viz. that the work done in school does not arise from the need of the community in which they live: it is laid down by university examination boards or other bodies external to the schools. Even when the teachers are represented on such boards, as in the setting up of C.S.E. schemes, the validity of such schemes is negated by the attitudes of the universities who regard them as inferior to G.C.E., and refuse to count them as being of equivalent value in entering the universities.

Little of the work done in school, other than in art, sports or crafts, is either pleasurable or seen by the children to be necessary. I recall that when the headmistress of a nearby Infant school asked some of my boys to make some badly-needed toys for the infants they went about the work with enthusiasm and care. When they took the toys to the infants and saw them play they asked eagerly whether they could make some more.

A third criticism that arises from the isolation of the school from the community is that the teachers are not seen by the children to be doing work of importance, as is the bus driver, the bricklayer, the farm worker or the doctor. Those who teach art, games or crafts less often complain that their classes are unruly or bored than do teachers of the academic subjects who can rarely be seen to practise what they teach. How often do children see the work of their English teacher in the local press or published as a book?

A fourth criticism is that the pupil-teacher ratio, even in Free and progressive schools and certainly in state schools, far exceeds the ratio of adults to children in non-industrial societies where education has not yet been separated off from productive work. The teacher, therefore, has to make his main activity not the production of goods or the more obvious services, with the education of a child or perhaps two or three at a particular moment, a subsidiary element of his work. His main preoccupation is the control and teaching of a large number of children remote from the actual work that is the basis of the abstractions that form the subject matter of his teaching.

A fifth criticism is that work in school has no natural beginning and end, no natural relationship to other forms of work and little variation in rhythm and form that calls for minute-by-minute assessment, judgement and decision. School work that comes nearest to having such qualities is seen in domestic subjects, games and handicrafts. In the hands of a good teacher a mathematical problem starts with a problem in real life - it might be the planning and costing of a camping expedition - and ends with the practical solution - the expedition whose success or failure is part of the judgement about whether the methods used in the solution were correct or not. Unfortunately, even the best of such teachers soon find themselves under pressure to abandon such methods in order to 'complete the syllabus'.

The Project Method, sometimes used in Primary schools, seeks to integrate knowledge and methods from different subjects around a central task. The idea arose from the work of Kirkpatrick, a contemporary of Dewey, who had observed that engineering students set to build a railway between two towns had to solve problems that included an analysis of the commercial interchange between the towns, a geological survey of the region to find the best and most economical route between the towns, and so on. When the railway had been built the students were seen to have a wider and deeper knowledge of what was required by engineering and a more profound satisfaction at the completion of the task than had been seen at the conclusion of courses undertaken by previous generations of similar students.

A sixth criticism is that the judgement of whether work done by students is good or bad, correct or incorrect, is too often seen by the students as an arbitrary decision by the teacher. A child whose rabbit hutch lets the rain in and the rabbit out knows, without being told by the teacher, that the job is not well done. And when he has found for himself he will then be ready to listen to the technical information that will help him to get it right. I have heard many teachers complain that allowing children to learn in this way would be wasteful of raw materials. They miss the point that if this way operates from the very beginning when the child starts to want to fix things together the child's attitude to instruction will be very different from what it is when he is compelled to practise dovetail joints until he gets them perfect before he is allowed to make something he really wants.

There are other criticisms to be made about schooling, whether state or progressive. A few families have kept their children at home and absorbed them into the work of the farm or the smallholding; they have then organised the education of the children around that work. Such an option is open only to those with such resources: it is not so easily available to the city dweller. It is very much preferable to ordinary schooling but it usually lacks at least two important components - the group of adults with varied skills, interests and personalities that are a healthy corrective to the suffocating dominance of one pair of parents over their own children, however cultivated and liberal they may be. The other missing element is the presence of other children from different parents and of different ages.

Closed family groups are incestuous in a cultural if not in a literal sense. As John Layard discovered in his work with the Stone Age people of Malekula, the 'incest taboo' was imposed not so much for genetic reasons as to ensure both that new discoveries made by one family - such as the invention of the plough - would, by exogamous marriage, be rapidly dispersed throughout the clan; and that the idiosyncratic relationships fostered by one pair of parents might not cause sources of division within the clan for too long.

We have now begun to realise afresh what 'primitive' societies had never forgotten, that the process of creating in the child not only knowledge and skill but, more importantly, the feelings and motives that will make her an intelligent, aware and effective individual, sensitive, responsive and cooperative, are much, much more complex than we had imagined and are certainly beyond the resources available to a single family or a single school. Through the linguistic work of Sapir, Chomsky, Bernstein and others; through the work of McV. Hunt, Hebb, Piaget, Luria and Vygotsky - not to mention the new generation of brain research emerging in the second half of this century - the intricate relationships between perception, action and symbol are steadily being understood. Speech encapsulates social experience and forms a 'frame of reference' or self-regulatory mechanism to guide action. No longer do we conceive of the brain as a 'tabula rasa' on which society inscribes its lessons but rather more as a restless, probing, active 'fountain of symbols' seeking to make coherent form of the endless stream of sense data and associations that surge through the body unceasingly.

Freud and those who followed him made clear that the intellect is so deeply affected by the love, hatred or indifference experienced when we were children that we may as easily become social and moral cripples or brutal psychopaths as loving people. We know, too, that such emotional injuries can only be put right by a consistent application of care and love that seeks to secure for the victim what the healer desires for himself.

But perhaps, beyond all this, there is a deeper criticism of school to be made, namely that it is an obstacle to the evolution of society. Because it tends to focus on to and holds our attention on the past; because it overvalues memory at the expense of intelligence or understanding; because it stresses competition and personal achievement and plays down cooperation and the collective good, it has the effect of desensitising us to the here and now, and it is in the here and now that the decisions we make shape both our world and our own perceptions of reality.

Simpler societies maintain themselves on oral history and tradition; they cannot, therefore, lock themselves onto the past to anything like the extent that we do. Societies that have chosen the path of class-division find themselves compelled to maintain those divisions. It suits their purpose that the written records which go with the growth of technology serve also as models for the conduct of current affairs. It is one thing to store records of discoveries and achievements: it is quite another to make those records the armature on which permanently to mould the form of society.

The evolutionary process dispensed with permanent and immutable forms and moved towards flexibility in adaptation. The language that the child learns is not exactly the language of his parents: some elements have begun to fade and some are emerging in response to changes in the society and its culture. Culture is more like a whirlpool that maintains its overall form but changes the details of that form and the elements that make it up. In this way each generation is closer to its own environment and better equipped to solve the problems that environment presents than if it had been equipped with the exact culture of its parents.

What can be done here and now?

The more fully democratic a society becomes the more readily do its institutions respond to the will both of those who control them and of those whom they are intended to serve. Schools are no different from other institutions except that, because most teachers have been chosen as 'safe' conventional people, they may be slower to change than most.

The 1944 Act resulted from a widespread appeal during the war to Local Authorities and others to state how they hoped to see education in the future. The Act embodied a more democratic system than had been seen before, vesting much more authority in County Councils to shape the pattern of schools according to local need. Parents were made responsible for seeing that their children were educated - a requirement that could have directed democratic pressure effectively had not the Ministry of Education frustrated those parts of the Act which also were intended to bring parents into much more direct control of schools by bringing them onto Managing and Governing Bodies to the extent of one-third of those bodies. More recently we have seen a tentative start to correct that blockage by the appointment of a parent representative and a teacher representative. We can now hope that control of schools will begin to respond more sensitively to local need.

Parents can, of course, help their children in the preschool years to develop the habit of making decisions for themselves; at first small decisions about food, clothing, toys and friends. Good habits begun early are established as normal in the mind of the child, so that he will expect to be consulted about things which affect him when he starts school.

Teachers can continue the work of the parents by bringing their pupils into decisions about work, organisation and discipline and by establishing reasoned argument as the way to reach sound decisions. Discussion about matters that directly concern the children is one of the best ways to develop language skills and to teach the important democratic lesson that other people, too, have a point of view.

Some schools do undertake real social work as part of their normal programme - reading to blind people, changing books for the old and infirm, cleaning and decorating for old people, taking care of gardens and pets. Some have even undertaken the design and manufacture of aids for the disabled. In a period of massive unemployment the Trade Unions may not easily allow real work to be taken from them, so it may be necessary for the teachers, as fellow trade unionists, to proceed with tact and to explain why they are seeking to change the curriculum. Even when they fail and are forced back on purely academic work they should, as good teachers have always done, make clear the relevance of that work to the real world with which the pupils are familiar.

Dartington Hall School has for some time adopted an 'Earn and Learn' scheme in which young apprentices work in the various industries that form part of the Trust - agriculture, horticulture, weaving, glassmaking and the building trades - while using the facilities of the school such as the library, the canteen, the leisure resources and the advice and friendship of interested staff. Unfortunately the scheme has not worked as

well as hoped because the rational, permissive ethos of the school where everyone knows everyone else by their first names and where disciplinary problems are 'talked through' in an amicable way, does not marry well with the 'employer/employee' relationship between apprentices and their instructors who have to maintain 'normal' industrial standards of competitiveness in the interests of profits. So the apprentices oscillate uneasily between the two worlds in the early days of their course and then, to avoid the stresses, have to opt to stay in the world of work and the leisure pursuits available to them in Totnes of an evening. Had the original intentions of the founders been carried out the School would have educated the children of the workers of the industries and some closer integration of education and work been possible.

In view of the arguments set out in previous sections of this paper it may seem inconsistent that I now argue for schools to be improved. I do so because I cannot yet see reliable signs that a transformation of our society to more genuinely democratic relationships is about to take place: no sign that the rigid social-class system with which we are burdened is beginning to melt. If anything, the concentration of wealth and power at one end of the social spectrum is more intense and the impact of unemployment and poverty at the other even more massive. Nevertheless changes have occurred to make people more conscious both of their condition and of the possibilities open to them, despite the unremitting appeals to self-interest and greed that assail their eyes and ears from all forms of the media.

Though I sympathise with many of Ivan Illich's sentiments about the predicament of the citizens of modern industrial nations I cannot agree with his analysis. I would, however, completely agree with his answer to a questioner at a press conference in St. Pancras Town Hall. The question was, "Do you think that your programme for deschooling society can be carried out without far-reaching social, political and economic changes?" His answer was, "Certainly not! Of course not!"

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