

# Education

## Institutions of Repression, Part 2

A. F.

### Today's Lesson

Schools are the training ground which provides compliant, disciplined, work-orientated, patriotic model citizens who are necessary to staff the compulsive relationships of everyday life. Just as the Catholic Church sanctified the social relationships and obligations of feudalism during the Middle Ages and made them appear “objective,” so now does “modern” education do the same for capitalism.

From the compulsory attendance, to straight lines, bells, “no talking,” passes for the bathrooms, dress codes, arbitrary and competitive grading systems, the obligatory patriotic observations, the fraudulent history, business oriented math problems (the list is endless), all are designed to have us willfully reproduce Capital with us as its subject.

It is the full-time activity of this society to reproduce itself daily, as noted radical educator George Gullen has said, “right in front of our noses.” But, as he has said further, it must do so always “behind our backs,” for the danger is ever-present that if we were to someday become consciously aware of exactly how it reproduces itself and what it does to us in the process, we might well decide we have better things to do with our lives and ditch the whole blood-soaked mess in favor of something a little more in line with our own self-interests.

But it is exactly what it does to us in that process which most often keeps us from seeing what it does to us in that process. We are conditioned from birth to view the world which confronts us as the product of inadvertence, to think that things are as they are because they are, because the state of affairs in which we live simply emerged as the natural “unconscious” (at least to earthly beings) unfolding of something variously called history, destiny, fate, “Geist,” the Divine Plan or just “the course of things.” At most it’s allowed as how some historical changes were the result of a few “great men” acting on a few “great ideas,” the rest of it has an objective existence outside of our ken and most certainly well beyond our control. The resulting situation, in which the overwhelming majority of individuals within a society have little or no critical awareness of the real social and historical forces which have formed them and their world (and consequently no power to transform them), has been defined by Paulo Freire (echoing Marx) as a “dehumanized society.” In so-called “backward,” peasant nations this condition is seen as the product of simple unlettered ignorance and primitive superstition (un-self-consciousness), but in the “advanced” nations like the U.S. it is, interestingly enough, the product of exactly that which poses itself as the enlightened answer to ignorance and superstition: education.

By far the most important function of education in “civilized” society is socialization; for anyone who has gone through the standard 12 years of formal public education it should be abundantly clear that the minimal knowledge and manual skills gained during that period could be gained by any normally intelligent human being in less than a quarter of that time, if they were truly interested. It’s a commonplace to observe that school is boring, but it is not boring by accident, it is boring by design.

“[In the late 1800’s] the manufacturers began listening to educational reformers like Horace Mann, who argued that schooling would not only reduce poverty and crime, but would also make better work-

ers. He suggested that the social relations (the hierarchical structure) of the school should reflect those of the factory. That way, the very process of education would teach people such needed traits as punctuality, dependability, obedience and willingness to work for external rewards.”

– Bob Peterson, “Unfair to Young People (how the public schools got the way they are), FPS

Toward the close of the nineteenth century in the U.S. the emergence of the corporatized economy which was to dominate the twentieth century was sparking a “vigorous” debate in business and civic circles over the declining importance of the classic American “rugged individualist.” While conservatives everywhere were issuing ominous warnings against the destruction of free market mechanisms inherent in both the huge corporations and the large labor organizations just then appearing, the more “forward thinking” liberal progressives were hailing them as the new form of a more rational and humane society, one which would replace the “cruelty” of competition with cooperation and shared goals.

Despite the apparently enormous significance the resolution of the argument was held to contain for the future direction of American society, the truth of the matter is the debate, like so many “debates” which have “wracked” the U.S., provided little more than the arena for the formulation of an ideological rationale for emerging economic forms which had already decided the outcome of the argument. The systems of mass production which were rapidly supplanting the small-scale producer (in particular the assembly line) demanded the disappearance of the “rugged individualist” and his replacement with a new breed of American, one capable of enduring the endless repetition of boring and increasingly meaningless tasks, of submerging his identity within that of the organization which defined him.

What this necessitated, if it was not to bring about a dangerously isolated and alienated industrial proletariat like those then threatening the “whole social fabric” in the industrialized countries of Europe, was the wholesale restructuring of the “individualist” ethos so that it could now accommodate the needs of the corporatized mass society. The ideology of individual competitiveness which had previously provided the mainspring mechanism for pre-corporate capitalism was now a hindrance, and it was the task of progressives like Herbert Croly to reformulate it to meet the changed circumstances:

“A man achieves individual distinction, not by the enterprise and vigor with which he accumulates money, but by the zeal and the skill with which he pursues an exclusive interest—an interest usually but not necessarily, connected with his means of livelihood...The individual can do much to aid national education by the single-minded and intelligent realization of his own specific purposes; but all individual successes will have little more than an individual interest unless they frequently contribute to the work of national construction.”

– Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life*, 1909

Croly was a leading exponent of the burgeoning corporate social philosophy of the early 1900’s and his extolling of the necessity for a new national ideal as a replacement for the disintegrating community of pre-corporate social forms eventually found its way into Teddy Roosevelt’s presidential campaign as the “New Nationalism.” Croly elaborated at length on the qualities of character necessary to the “new” individual and, most importantly, the best way to insure their inculcation: education.

The initial response to the cry for an educated (properly socialized and stratified) proletariat came in the form of corporate paternalism: factories and businesses around the country began “intervening” in the “outside” lives of their employees via the formation of “self-improvement” programs (many of them compulsory) which included free schooling for them and their children, libraries, day-care centers, lecture halls, religious instruction and various clubs and company periodicals (the invention of the social secretary is attributed to this movement).

When it became apparent that the social strife accompanying the rapid transformation of American life during that period (the “overnight” urbanization, cycles of high unemployment, huge influxes of non-English-speaking immigrants, etc.) would require something more comprehensive than individual companies’ responses, the business community, aided by their progressive liberal spokesmen, began pressuring for the formation of a “universal, compulsory, tax-supported school system.”

The education system that eventually emerged served all these needs and more: in addition to its socialization tasks it provided an ideal sponge for the absorption of surplus labor and thus eased the social pressures generated by periods of high unemployment. More than this, since the system had been established directly at the behest of the “business community,” the reformers who had called for its formation succeeded in dominating it formally as well as philosophically.

These reformers saw the corporation as the ideal form for efficient social organization at every level, up to and including the society itself. Thus, as the system expanded, its structure took on more and more the appearance of the corporate hierarchy, its methods more and more became those of the efficiently-run enterprise, only fulfilling its purpose when its “students received their diplomas on schedule, and (its) operations were handled economically.” (Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*)

The history of public education in the U.S. since that time has been, in line with the continuous expansion of leisure time and ever-growing demand for greater and greater specialization, one of more or less continuous growth and stratification. With few and minor exceptions, the only changes that have occurred within it have been those which have furthered the ends of the status quo (even if that means occasionally appearing to disrupt it—integration, for example), centralized and concentrated the power of the state, and reinforced the reproduction of passive, uncritical, obedient and well-adjusted citizen/ worker/consumers.

Such “innovations” as tracking and IQ tests based on white middle-class standards of “intelligence” more effectively reproduce the existing class, racial and sexual divisions in this society than any form of force-propped coercion could ever do.

But more insidious than this is the fact that “education,” like capitalism itself, has taken on a mystified objective legitimacy that transcends its sordid origins. Having successfully kept its genesis from us via its own “fraudulent history,” it convinces us that the social relations to which it molds us are nothing more than the natural outgrowth of a fixed human nature. Thus we learn to view a world of hierarchies, of dominators and submitters, of leaders and led, of thought and action divided, of performance for external reward or punishment, in fact, of everything dehumanizing in this society, as a simple natural reflection of “man’s” (not woman’s) biologically limited capacity for self-knowledge and self-activity.

Thus today, the system of education which evolved to meet the need of a dominant class for a pacified working class stands before us as the universal and objective form of education. It is all the more convincing because it is everywhere; in Europe, in the Soviet Union, in China, in Cuba, its ends are always the same: the production of a society of compliant mass individuals whose character structures best meet the needs of an emerging or expanding industrial economy and its particular brand of ideological baggage.

It is no coincidence that the nationalistic claptrap mouthed by that idiot “the great teacher of our people, the respected and beloved leader, comrade Kim Il Sung,” to urge the North Korean people to yet greater heights of productivity and self-negation is identical, literally, to that of the liberal progressive “prophets” who flourished at the turn of the century in the U.S., when its “modern” economy was emerging and demanded a “new national ideal”

Whether the mystifications are those of Christendom, Capitalism or State Socialism, they are always propagated by the “leaders” for the benefit of the “led,” and they are always necessitated by the same circumstance—an otherwise intolerable reality of exploitation, domination and daily dehumanization.

Publications read in preparing this article:

Joel Spring, *A Primer of Libertarian Education*

– *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State*

Bob Peterson/FPS, “Unfair to Young People” (the public schools and how they got the way they are)

Ivan Illich, et al, *After Deschooling, What?*



A. F.  
Education  
Institutions of Repression, Part 2

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/269-february-1976/education>  
Fifth Estate #269, February, 1976

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**