

Whose kids? OUR Kids!

prole cat

2004

Sick with the flu, our family had just finished a group medical examination. The doctor paused before leaving and asked, "Does anyone need an excused absence from work? Does the child need one for school?" My first thought was, why does everyone automatically assume that a three-year-old "goes to school"? And my second thought was, since when does a parent have to justify himself to the school authorities, anyway?

The parent as a surrogate state

When I was in grade school some thirty years ago, it was understood that the school would act as a sort of police force against truancy, against children who "played hooky." Truancy officers existed for the sole purpose of stopping kids from pursuing idyllic pastimes A la Tom Sawyer, in lieu of attending class. No one really questioned the school's authority to do this. If a child was absent from class, the principle might call the student's home, or a parent's place of employment. And upon returning to class, the child was required to bring "a note from home," from her parent or legal guardian.

In all of these measures, it was understood that the school was acting as a sort of surrogate parent, enforcing the will of the parents in their absence. The assumption was that the parent and the school both wanted the same thing, a good education for the child. The only danger was that the child, in her immaturity, might act against her own best interest. So the school acted as attendance monitor for the busy parents.

However, it was understood that the parent had final say in all matters concerning the child. The reason that the child had to bring a note from a parent was to prove that the parent had given permission for the absence. If the parent said the absence was excused, regardless of the reason, then that was that.

As I learned on my recent family trip to the doctor, this is no longer the case. Today a parent must document that when she gave the child permission to stay home, that permission was indeed warranted.

Has it come to this, finally? Has our notoriously patriarchal society reached the point that the well-being of a child is now first the responsibility of the state, and only incidentally that of the parent? Does a parent now draw his authority in familial matters, by extension from the government? Will we someday be required to obtain parenting licenses, while being piously informed that parenting is "a privilege, and not a right"? Will we stand for it?

Piece by piece, one facet after another of American life has been removed from the autonomous social arena, and placed under the jurisdiction of the state and its financiers, the business class. With disturbingly little comment or lament, the American citizenry has offered up a tradition of self-government that it claimed to hold dear to the monopoly of the two political parties and the corporations who fund them. The demands of gaining a livelihood assume an increasingly central role in the modern person's life, at the expense of "personal" time. On the family front, we take it for granted that the state has the right to remove a child from an "unfit" parent. Slowly, surely, the burden of proof shifts from the government to prove that a parent is unfit, and becomes the task of the parent to prove their worthiness to the state.

Has it really come to this? Are we now prepared to follow the example of Abraham, to stand ready to make a sacrificial offering of our very children to the tender mercies of the government bureaucrats?

The role of the public school

What is the real purpose, the true agenda of a public school education? Certainly the “three R’s”, reading writing, and arithmetic continue to play a prominent role, and rightly so. And let us neglect for the moment the manner in which history is taught, with its exclusive focus on the western world, and the anglophile’s interpretation of events. Let us just concede that history and other social sciences are taught, and that they should be.

But what else do our kids “learn” along the way? Are they being prepared to be active, creative, critical citizens, or are they being groomed for a life of compliance, for a life of being dutifully shepherded through a regimented workplace to their evening spot on the couch, where the television then tells them how to spend the money that they earn?

Let us consider, as an example, the lesson that our children are sure to decipher when they arrive at school and make their morning pass through a metal detector: “You can’t trust your friends, but the authorities will protect you.” Of course, this proficiently prepares them for a lifetime of watching television news shows, which carry a similarly slanted and alarmist message. “Tonight at 6:00, ‘When Poor People Attack Home Owners...’

Some handwringers are sure to respond, “But what about the Columbine massacre, and the similar school shootings?” And thoughtful parents will reply, “What about them?” In reaction to a handful of copy-cat shootings, we have thrown millions of children across the span of a huge nation into a state of perpetual distrust and anxiety. We should be as skeptical that the Columbine killings actually led to the new obsession with school security, as we are that the World Trade Center attacks led to the Patriot Act or the invasion of Iraq. Big Brother stands ever ready to claim liberties in the name of security, but never seems to return them when the crisis has passed.

Politics makes strange bedfellows

In radical political circles it is customary to periodically reevaluate our strategy and tactics, to ask what we could do better, or what we should be doing differently. In this context, it is not uncommon to read analyses that would seem to suggest unlikely political alliances.

One such analysis, one such investigation of the potential for an alliance that I would like to see is between the progressive left and the home school movement. Like the militias, the home-school movement is the product of rural American culture (and in the latter case, of southern culture, I think). It comes with a ready-made media stereotype, that of the stern Christian fundamentalist who believes the US government to be the Beast of the Apocalypse.

As my daughter approaches school age and our family gives thought to her immediate future, I have had the good fortune to make contact with a sampling of these home-schooling families. For every family that fits the stereotype, there is another who defies it. I have met home schooling fundamentalists, pagans, atheists, and people like myself who fail to see what relevance religion has to education anyway. The majority of home-schoolers in my immediate vicinity I would describe as religious, Christian, but not fundamentalist. Many of these Christian families take issue with the public school more on educational grounds, than on the basis of values or superstition.

Support your local home school association

More important than the religious inclinations of the particular families involved, is the fact that these parents are taking direct action in rebellion against the domination of the state. Direct action, we will recall, does not necessarily involve property destruction or arrest (much of what passes for direct action these days, actually has the goal of attracting the attention of the corporate media, who serve as an intermediary between the activists and the

public they hope to reach). Few actions are so direct, or so threatening to the authority of the state, as to refuse to allow the indoctrination of impressionable children by withdrawing them from public school.

The self-righteous right has claimed the cause of elitist private schools for its own political purposes. The left, in the finest traditions of direct action and grassroots social organization, should embrace the home school movement and claim it as its own. We should initiate a dialogue with such home school associations as may exist, and offer our support and encouragement. We should place demands on the state, not so much for material support, but to leave these brave pioneers alone.

Most importantly, we should stop willingly handing our vulnerable children over to the callous jailers of the state.

— January, In the Year of our Store, 2004

Excerpt from Dr. Ben Reitman, *Sister of the Road: the Autobiography of Boxcar Bertha* (2002) \$15.00

I was eleven years old when ... mother left her boarding house and took us to Little Rock, Arkansas, to a co-operative colony in the hills. We found there thirty-five families, socialists, anarchists, and free-thinkers, all opposed to war, weary of the struggle for existence, blaming capitalism for their difficulties, all wanting economic security and mental peace without too much of an effort. They were living in houses and cottages they built themselves clustered in a beautiful valley. All worked the land.

There were seventy-one of us children. We went to a school conducted in an old barn by two remarkable teachers, Bill White and his wife, Edna. They had taught school in the east, but had been forced to leave when the school board discovered that they had never been legally married. They had come to the colony in hopes of establishing a modern Francisco Ferrer school.

We did not get much regular school work, probably, but we did have some reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling. Mostly we learned about inconsistencies of religion, and about governments, labor, and economics. We were taught that the capitalistic system was wrong and that people are poor because they are exploited and do not get the full product of their labor. We were shown that the government protected the private property of the rich, and that without government and violence the rich could not continue. We were taught also in the colony the dignity of labor and were made to feel the need for preparing ourselves to live in a free co-operative society.

The only textbooks I remember we had were William Morris' *News From Nowhere*, Oscar Wilde's *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Emile Zola's *Labor*, and Walt Whitman. We had to recite one of Whitman's poems every day.

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