

Commodifying experience

The School of Tyrannical Indoctrination

Frank Joseph Smecker

In the mid- to late 19th Century, the rapidly expanding Industrial Age provided the impetus behind the expansion of the public school system. Reading, writing and arithmetic were pressed into service in order to form a needed literate labor force.

At the same time, it was important to assure that this newly educated proletariat remained obedient and submissive to authority. Subject matter such as history was taught from the perspective of great men and the victors of wars. Mathematics inculcated the presumption that the world is comprised of generalized numbers to be counted, manipulated and exploited. Reading and writing silenced languages older than words themselves.

With industrialism metastasizing throughout much of Europe and the U.S., alienation from an ecological provenance increased as did estrangement from body, mind, and emotions (already having suffered from millennia of civilization). Concurrently, such wholesale distancing and division from the natural offered an unprecedented level of control for the rulers.

Howard Zinn wrote in *A People's History of the United States*, "High schools developed as aids to the industrial system, that history was widely required in the curriculum to foster patriotism. Loyalty, oaths, teacher certification, and the requirement of citizenship were introduced to control both the educational and the political quality of teachers."

Clocks and bells primed individuals to respond to an employer's itinerary and to be more proficient in efficiency leaving no room for diversity or creativity. The emerging forms of production and wage labor necessitated uniformity for optimal and smooth functionality. Classroom rules themselves, such as raising-of-hands-to-be-called-upon, conditions the student to respond with deference to authority, to give one's self away to authority, chiseling away, piece by piece, at a sense of personal agency. All of these elements and their implications remain today, virtually unchanged from their original forms.

Formal education, however, is much deeper than training individuals for a lifetime of wage labor. It is about instilling attitudes that remain by one's side, directing behavior and a fear of authority that propels a person to acquiesce to bosses and rulers.

Lewis Mumford, writing in *The Pentagon of Power*, explained that the Hobbesian vision of "life as a constant struggle for power motivated by fear, became the foundation of both the practical doctrines of imperialism and the ideal doctrine of machine-oriented progress, as both were carried into the nineteenth century as the Malthus-Darwin 'struggle for existence.'" This vision of life as a competitive struggle, motivated by fear, has imbued the classroom since its origins.

What can be said of the subject matter taught throughout classrooms today? Is it not all derived from a Western, white, civilized, upper class and patriarchal perspective of the world? Could it have anything to do with the perpetuation of the dominant culture by silencing other truths, histories, concepts, and theories held by a diversity of other cultures?

Seldom acknowledged in modern schooling are the qualities of pre-Columbian mathematics which enabled the Mayan people to develop the notion of zero and work with multi-digit prime numbers without the aid of a computer. There is little mention of Mexicano mathematics which allowed that culture to devise a calendar far more accurate than the one commonly used today.

And, what about arithmetic and subsequent mathematics? What are the costs of teaching people that the world is made up of generalized objects to be counted and used?

Anti-civilization author, John Zerzan, writes: "Our notions of reality are the products of an artificially constructed symbol system, whose components have hardened into reifications or objectifications over time, as division of labor coalesced into domination of nature and domestication of the individual."

Symbolism seeks to substitute a notional reality for real, physical one. This conveniently warrants cultural authority to express methods of control over a socially constructed world. What is the mathematization of nature other than reducing a dynamic and complex world to generalized, fixed, objective symbols, i.e., numbers to be counted, manipulated, exploited, and managed?

We can assume that $1+1=2$, but, what if "1" denotes an organic entity? Suddenly, "1" does not and cannot account for a web of relationships, personal history, propensities, proclivities, affinities, emotions, and so on. It becomes silly to invest all you have in the assumption that numbers will reveal what's possible, probable, and necessary. The world can teach us that through direct experience without symbols.

Numbers are a gross misrepresentation of what they seek to replace. Environmental activist and author, Derrick Jensen, revealing the socio-pathology of the dominant culture, says it is much easier to kill a number than a living being whether it is trees for thousands of board feet of lumber, tons of salmon for grocery store stock, or humans as collateral damage. Given the breadth and scope of the precarious and pernicious nature of numbers and mathematics, one must ask: What are the implications of an entire economic system based on the presumption that the world is comprised of objects to be counted and used? Essentially, the whole system of symbols we are taught to apply to everything is an instrument of control that is necessary for the domination of nature.

Why is it that we are not taught about the intuitive, subjective, relational and reciprocal aspects of life as well as the objective, instrumental and exploitative functions of human behavior? The purpose of school is twofold: to condition and frighten people into accepting an economic system that is predicated upon and accelerated by the transformation of the living into the dead (mountains into energy, animals into cold-cuts, humans into worker drones, ad nauseam) and, to normalize the violence and annihilation at the other end of a mediated and atomized industrial production process.

There is, irrefutably, an underlying curriculum to the schooling process. The rich cannot continue to steal from the poor and the powerful cannot continue to destroy the planet without an unremitting centralization of their wealth and power. The maintenance of power cannot occur and sustain its continuity unless individuals are trained to fill work and consumption roles and to perceive the world as generalized objects to be counted, manipulated and exploited.

Without specifically designed institutions of control and domination, no one would be willing to spend most of their waking hours at wage work, especially when the benefits of their labor is what maintains a perverse pattern of social inequality. One important function of school is to normalize this social imbalance and to create an acceptance of the vertical flow of wealth and its percolation upwards to the apex of the pyramidal hierarchy of the stratified social-construct.

Education exists in order to maintain production which necessitates a totalitarian system of ideas, institutions, beliefs, etc., identified as the control center of Mumford's Megamachine, or the dominant-cultural-economic-power-complex. This power-complex is not a tyranny endemic to vulturine capitalism, but emerges from the idea of civilization itself. Totalitarian underpinnings inhere within any of the governing institutions of contemporary civilization—democracy, fascism, autocracy, monarchy, etc.

Radical psychiatrist, R.D. Laing, asseverated in his landmark book, *The Politics of Experience*, that the way we educate people drives them mad. In order to restore health to an entire planet and its inhabitants, the pathology of the dominant culture must be cured. This entails the unmaking of civilization, to allow the landscape of experience to reunite with the landscape of unadulterated life, where humans can once again make union with their ecological necessities.

This must be the aspiration of a new pedagogy of green praxis.

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