

Education as the Domestication of Inner Space

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We are taught since early childhood that everything in the world exists in a food chain as a “resource” to be consumed by those higher up the chain and concurrently as the consumer of “resources” that are lower in this predatory hierarchy. We are also told that life in the wild is hungry, fraught with mortal danger and that civilization has spared us a short and brutish existence. As children, we thus come to believe that life in civilization is good for us, in fact even indispensable for our very survival.

Today’s civilization, namely the European/Western, owes its existence to the Agricultural Revolution, which was born in the Fertile Crescent with the domestication of emmer wheat in the Middle East around 17,000 B.P.—an event followed by the domestication of dogs in Southeast Asia around 12,000 B.P. and independent parallel civilizations in North America around 11,000 B.P. [1] Accordingly, a new conception of food fueled this socio-environmental praxis as it drove some humans to shift their subsistence strategies from those based on a conception of the environment as wild or existing for its own purpose supporting diversity of life to seeing the world as existing for human purposes, to be managed, owned, and consumed.

Thus, civilization began not simply as an agricultural revolution; rather, the revolution occurred in the ontological and monocultural conception of the world as existing for human use and consumption, thereby creating the need for such concepts as resource, hierarchy, and labour. Since civilization is rooted in the appropriation of food and “natural resources” as well as of slave labour (dogs, horses, cows, women, miners, farmers, et al), all of our institutions today inadvertently cater to these constructs and the needs that have been generated by this monocultural perspective. That is why every contemporary institution or company has a department of “human resources” and is thereby linked to managing, killing, and protecting the ownership of “natural” and other resources. [2]

Hence, everything, including humans, became “professionalized” and thus divided into gendered, ethnic, racial, and other categories specializing in specific spheres of labour thereby falling into defined niches of the “food chain”. Language reflects these categories and naturalizes oppression. For instance, in European languages, humanity is conflated with maleness. The word “woman” allows us to unconsciously accept that womanhood entails an aspect of humanness which erases our (female) animality thereby excluding the depersonified nonhuman animals from the privileges accorded to some animals (a small group of primates) by belonging to “humanity”. Moreover, by separating these categories of humanity, animality, femaleness, maleness, race, ethnicity, et al., language veils the racist, speciesist, and patriarchal essence of civilization where human and nonhuman women have been relegated to a class specializing in the production of human and nonhuman resources.

As children, we are thus programmed through language to accept our “specialized” places and roles in the cycle of oppression. Consequently, Africans were forced to work on plantations or in mines. The lower or dispossessed classes in Europe were turned into serfs and then into factory workers. Cows became “food”, horses—labour and/or entertainment, wild animals exterminated or hunted for fun, just to name some examples. Such outbursts of socio-environmental cultures had occurred sporadically in human and nonhuman societies throughout the history of life.

However, until the Middle Eastern and Egyptian civilizations conquered Europe, this paradigm for subsistence based on exploitation and consumption had never achieved the global scale that we are experiencing today.

Growing up in Sudan, I learned, as early as the fifth grade, about civilization through a British curriculum and, ever since, the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates and the Indus Valley have captured my imagination. However, I remained puzzled by the dissonance between the deep sense of happiness and serenity that I had experienced in my childhood in the presence of wildness and the underlying assumption in civilized epistemology that portrayed the world as inhospitable to us, where life meant struggle and suffering. Even while accepting this suffering and struggle until my early twenties, I knew deep inside that being in the world and in my body was an incredible source of joy when not submitting to the religious, capitalist, or civilized decrees to obey those higher up the “food chain” hierarchy and to work, exploit others, kill, and consume.

This connection between food, colonization, and civilization has always been articulated in schoolbooks as something positive, intelligent, and important. Starting with our earliest curriculum, obligatory schooling indoctrinates us to believe in the necessity of colonizing the environment by monocultural perspective and coerces us into participating in this colonizing project.

Successful colonization hinges on the extent to which the domesticated resources are capable of generating surplus value of products, services, or flesh for their owners/consumers at minimum expenditure. To accomplish this, the one who domesticates must modify the purpose of being of the victim from wild existence for an uncontained reason to someone who exists to work most efficiently and produce the maximum in the shortest amount of time, in the smallest possible space, and with the least possible energy (food and other energy expenditures). The domesticator must also “educate” or convince the “resources” that they are resources. Civilization thus begins with the modification of the inner landscape of the domesticated being. The earlier this process begins, the better, preferably at birth and even before conception when the very concept of child is built on the understanding that her *raison d’être* is to serve the “higher”, outside, abstract social order called the “social good”. Civilization thus needed and thereby created a system of modification of children’s behaviour by means of a systematic imposition of civilized information, logic, and schema, namely: schooling.

A Soviet anarchist physiologist and director of the Moscow laboratory for developmental physiology between 1935 and 1978, Ilya Arshavsky, saw wilderness as a place of morality because the wild are guided by empathy and the knowledge that life must flourish in diversity in order for us to thrive. The wild have no choice but to collaborate with diversity and life, he says. Civilization, in contrast, says Arshavsky, is immoral, because the civilized have accorded themselves the right to choose whether to punish or not, to torture or not, to kill or not. Most important, he explains how civilized parenting and schooling are responsible for the ecological devastation, war, and other forms of brutality against animals and wilderness. [3] It is not an accident, therefore, that civilized education takes place in the sterility of the school, where children are locked up for most of their lives between four walls and are taught through print and other media how to succeed by working in civilization to reinforce hierarchy.

In any school around the world, with the exception of caged or farmed animals kept for the purpose of training children in domestication, children are kept away from other species and even from different age groups and generations of humans. Moreover, the socio-economic structure of public space and the inequality in the distribution of wealth segregate schoolchildren by class even in those schools where attempts are made at mixing genders, ethnic groups and socio-economic classes. In tangible ways, schools ensure that children are denied the possibility of experiencing life outside the walls or beyond the limited family network, because even family relationships are secondary to the time children spend in schools and to the importance placed on schooling. Therefore they acquire no real knowledge of how the world thrives or suffers or how their civilized subsistence paradigm causes others to suffer and die.

Years of such isolation impairs children’s ability to empathize with other human and nonhuman people and renders them prone to accepting ethical stances rooted in alienation, hostility to the wild, and ignorance. In fact, immorality, cruelty, and ignorance constitute the most prominent features of civilization. If the aim of education is to proliferate civilization, then it stands to reason that, whether this agenda is articulated or not, schools work to instill these qualities in future “human resources” and therefore the competitiveness, bullying, and other forms of violence that are rampant in today’s schools reflect this foundation. [4]

Conversely, in wild ontologies, beings get born for their own purpose and pleasure of being. Their very existence is thus their *raison d'être* in itself. The fact that wild beings continue to exist without anyone teaching them how to do it demonstrates that human and nonhuman children are hardwired to learn how to live; and since they cannot thrive in a dying environment, they also learn that the best for living beings is to maintain a balance of diversity in the community of life. This epistemology, or way of knowing ourselves and the world, is rooted in the fundamental premise of wildness: namely, if life happened on earth it is because the conditions were favorable to life and if the world is good for life, then living beings, by virtue of living, know what is best for them. The best for living beings is health, diversity, and happiness.

Acquisition of such knowledge requires presence and the capacity to understand the emotional and experiential state of those who share one's space, one's world. As Erica-Irene Daes writes on behalf of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations established in 1982 regarding the peoples whose subsistence cultures are based on sustainable wild socio-environmental relationships:

“Indigenous peoples regard all products of the human mind and heart as interrelated, and as flowing from the same source: the relationship between the people and their land, their kinship with the other living creatures that share the land, and with the spirit world. Since the ultimate source of knowledge and creativity is the land itself, all of the art and science of a specific people are manifestations of the same underlying relationships...” [5]

Therefore, in wild societies children are expected to learn through experience and interaction with empathetic and protective family and community where a child is encouraged to try, test, and experience herself and her surroundings. Nondomesticated nonhuman and human animals allow the child to develop her instincts and to forge biodiverse relationships through experience, empathy, and self-realization, no matter how obscure that self-realization may appear to others. There are endless examples that span human and other animal societies. The Semai people of Malaya offer us a contemporary illustration of such parenting and childhood cultures.

Like many other indigenous societies around the world, the Semai do not impose restrictions other than on violent or competitive games or when responding to immediate life-threatening danger. [6] They do not coerce children to serve nor do they practice any form of psychological, moral, or physical punishment on children, because they see the child as desiring and capable of learning simply by living and enjoying the safety of the unconditional love that the community provides. [7] In such societies, as soon as they begin to crawl, children assimilate the culture of hygiene and social interactions, for instance, they quickly learn where to go to the toilet without books, narratives, or the threat of ostracism. They also learn that any expression of cruelty, including the consumption of animals they raise, is not part of a “natural food chain”, but constitutes cannibalism and is part of the larger context of violence that marks civilized relationships. [8]

Pedagogy can thus have no place in wilderness. It can only exist in civilized societies where the intention is to integrate children as future “resources” into an established hierarchy of consumption (of effort, labour, and lives). Such “integration” requires a system of education that modifies children's behavior, needs, and desires. This is domestication per se and it entails standardization of purpose: the food chain for which everything and everyone supposedly exists. Unlike in wilderness, where it is vital for children to learn to respond to change and difference innovatively yet in a symbiotic manner, in civilization, control of what, when, and how children learn constitutes an indispensable part of a fixed and abstract curriculum intended to prepare them to work in controlled and predictable environments producing and catering for the needs of owners. Education is therefore a system of domestication that relies on confinement, isolation, formulaic thinking, and representational language, rather than on presence and personal experience, whose goal is to eradicate idiosyncrasies and instead inculcate, by means of pain and the withdrawal of food, the “knowledge”, or the notion that one exists not for one's own pleasure, but as a resource of labor or nourishment for someone else.

Such modification of one's purpose and being becomes the focus of inter-generational relations and constitutes the most characteristic experience of childhood, lasting, at least, until early adult years, if not later through university and graduate school. This practice stems from the assumption that children will not learn how to live (in civilization) and serve others as resources unless they are forced to learn by means of threats and a systematic

infliction of emotional and/or physical pain. And of course, this is an accurate contention, for children know that they exist to enjoy life, not to torture it, not to suffer from it, and not to extinguish it. Resistance to domestication has always been strong. Hence, it takes decades to eradicate wild will and hardly any time at all for human and nonhuman animals to go feral.

In this respect, food lies at the nexus of domestication, colonization, civilization, and education, for it constitutes the resource, the method, and the underlying reason of civilized violence. Specifically, the retraction of food and the induction of hunger is the method of training nonhuman people to serve the interests of human domesticators. Human animals are domesticated in the same way by means of the threat of poverty or starvation which, at its core, is about the retraction of food and which constitutes the main pedagogical method in training human resources: schools use grades and other psychological and physical punishment to coerce future resources (workers) to comply with the hierarchical order. Namely, good grades promise a higher place in the food chain; lower grades and bad reports threaten with hunger, homelessness, social isolation, and suffering either from unemployment or performing menial tasks in underpaid jobs in often horrendous conditions. School evaluations serve to justify the apathy on the part of those who exploit the suffering and labour of those whom this hierarchical socio-economic system forces to the bottom of the food-chain. In other words, cruelty, apathy, and alienation are artificially inculcated in institutions of “learning” in order to civilize and colonize human and nonhuman resources in the name of food and simultaneously by means of food. These qualities are not the side effect or the result of an undesirable accident of “human nature”; they lie at the heart of a civilized agenda. In fact, they are an intrinsic part of the mechanism that ensures its proliferation.

It therefore comes as no surprise that like never before, the last century has seen an unprecedented globalization of obligatory schooling where the formation of civilized children’s *habitus* has become largely confined to the classroom whose hierarchical structure demands obedience to higher ranking persons of authority (e.g. teacher and appointed class leaders) and where children learn through listening to the teacher and through reading and writing. Classes are arranged by age, outsiders are not allowed, and this confinement of children in spaces with age peers eliminates the possibilities of children experiencing the chaos of everyday life in the real world. In the last century, literacy and colonial languages have been imposed on children around the world regardless of their cultural background or whether the work that they would end up doing requires reading or writing skills, particularly in a foreign, colonial language.

My own childhood is a perfect illustration of this colonization and its complexities. When living in Russia, my options of school curricula were limited to Russian, which was the official language of the Soviet Union and the satellite “friendly” nations and, when we moved to Sudan, I was schooled in English and Arabic, both of which were colonizer languages in Africa. Furthermore, all of my education was anthropocentric and mostly Eurocentric and alienated from the real life of the north eastern African landscape in which I lived and which was devastated in order to serve “Western/Middle Eastern” and colonial needs—first for human slave labour, then for ivory stolen from murdered elephants, then cotton, copper, uranium, and finally petroleum, among endless other violations of life. After independence from Britain in 1956, Sudan inherited colonial borders and remained a colonial entity by virtue of its inscription in the hierarchy of the “post” colonial economic order and thus continued the legacy of mining, slavery, exploitation, war, and desertification, thereby re-enacting the exploitation paradigm of the predatory food chain. This is true for all the nation states of the contemporary world, for there can be no sovereignty in civilization, which is colonialism per se, encroaching upon and conquering our inner and outer landscape.

As the most effective method of domestication, education has always played a critical role in all of this. Historically, when Arabs and later Europeans would colonize a new place, the first thing they did was to open schools, or *madrasah* and *kottab* in Arabic. Yet, in spite of the causal relationship between civilization, suffering, and environmental devastation, the more desperate the ecological situation grows, the more excruciatingly “enhanced” civilized schooling becomes and the more parents demand it for their children, accepting the state’s propaganda that education is the answer. However, the ten thousand years of civilization have demonstrated that it was civilization itself that brought about organized violence, spread poverty among the dispossessed classes of nonhuman and human animals whose malnourishment, stress, and exploitation weakened the immune system, while cramped living conditions facilitated the spread of contagious diseases and epidemics. For instance, Armelagos and colleagues discuss in their 1991 paleontological research how sedentism and agriculture increased early mortality rates, par-

ticularly negatively affecting women, children, and the oldest adults. [9] According to them, the sudden growth in Neolithic population occurred in spite of the increased mortality by reducing the intervals between births and increasing the number of births per woman.

In other words, civilization demanded disposable human resources for military, policing, and hard labour and this demand was met by the adoption of a patriarchal paradigm that increased monocultural populations, deteriorating the immune system of individuals, groups, and the whole environment. But I have not learned this in school. I looked for this research on my own. For, the more educated we become, the further away we stray from remembering the happiness of simply being in the world, of treading lightly upon the earth lest we hurt it. Still, parents entrenched in the civilizing project, regardless of their place in it, continue to believe that if people are educated even further, domesticated even deeper, and punished even more, then happiness—in whatever shallow understanding of it that the civilized may entertain—shall come.

I do not know if at this point the ecological crisis is preventable. However, we still must do everything in our power to tackle its root cause and stop it. This requires a thorough re-examination of the epistemology that drives civilization and hence the abolition of all forms of coercion and incarceration including, or perhaps rather starting with, schools.

Layla AbdelRahim is an interdisciplinary author who uses a variety of research methods and disciplines to understand civilization, wilderness, and our place in the world. Her recent book, *Wild Children—Domesticated Dreams: Civilization and the Birth of Education* (Fernwood, 2013), examines the connections between civilization, domestication, and education relying on her journal entries as well as on anthropological and ethological research.

For more on her critique of education, civilization, literature, and culture visit her website: www.layla.miltsov.org

Endnotes

1. Ellen in Ingold, Tim (ed.) (1997) *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology: Humanity, Culture, and Social Life*, London: Routledge.

2. For an in-depth analysis, see AbdelRahim, Layla (2013) *Wild Children—Domesticated Dreams: Civilization and the Birth of Education*, Winnipeg: Fernwood.

And my dissertation:

_____ (2011) *Order and the Literary Rendering of Chaos: Children's Literature as Knowledge, Culture, and Social Foundation*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Montreal.

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3. From AbdelRahim, Layla (2013) *Wild Children—Domesticated Dreams: Civilization and the Birth of Education*, Winnipeg: Fernwood.

4. I discuss the statistics and the roots of violence in-depth in AbdelRahim, Layla (2013) *Wild Children—Domesticated Dreams: Civilization and the Birth of Education*, Winnipeg: Fernwood. As well as in:

_____ (2011) *Order and the Literary Rendering of Chaos: Children's Literature as Knowledge, Culture, and Social Foundation*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Montreal.

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5. Quoted in Ingold, Tim (2007) *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill*, London and New York: Routledge, page 150.

6. Dentan, Robert Knox (1968) *The Semai: A Nonviolent People of Malaya*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Armelagos, George J., Alan H. Goodman, and Kenneth H. Jacobs (Fall 1991). "The Origins of Agriculture: Population Growth During a Period of Declining Health." *Population and Environment: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 13, 1: 9–22.

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