

Irrational Consistencies*

I believe that the contemporary crisis of education demands that we review the very idea of publicly prescribed learning, rather than the methods used in its enforcement. The dropout rate--especially of junior-high-school students and elementary-school teachers--points to a grass-roots demand for a completely fresh look. The "classroom practitioner" who considers himself a liberal teacher is increasingly attacked from all sides. The free-school movement, confusing discipline with indoctrination, has painted him into the role of a destructive authoritarian. The educational technologist consistently demonstrates the teacher's inferiority at measuring and modifying behavior. And the school administration for which he works forces him to bow to both Summerhill and Skinner, making it obvious that compulsory learning cannot be a liberal enterprise. No wonder that the desertion rate of teachers is overtaking that of their students.

America's commitment to the compulsory education of its young now reveals itself to be as futile as the pretended American commitment to compulsory democratization of the Vietnamese. Conventional schools obviously cannot do it. The free-school movement entices unconventional educators, but ultimately does so in support of the conventional ideology of schooling. And the promises of educational technologists, that their research and

- This chapter was presented originally at a meeting of the American Educational Research Association, in New York City, February 6, 1971.

66 DESCHOOLING SOCIETY

development--if adequately funded--can offer some kind of final solution to the resistance of youth to compulsory learning, sound as confident and prove as fatuous as the analogous promises made by the military technologists.

The criticism directed at the American school system by the behaviorists and that coming from the new breed of radical educators seem radically opposed. The behaviorists apply educational research to the "induction of autotelic instruction through individualized learning packages." Their style clashes with the nondirective cooption of youth into liberated communes established under the supervision of adults. Yet, in historical perspective, these two are just contemporary manifestations of the seemingly contradictory yet really complementary goals of the public school system. From the beginning of this century, the schools have been protagonists of social control on the one hand and free cooperation on the other, both placed at the service of the "good society," conceived of as a highly organized and smoothly working corporate structure. Under the impact of intense urbanization, children became a natural resource to be molded by the schools and fed into the industrial machine. Progressive politics and the cult of efficiency converged in the growth of the U.S. public school.* Vocational guidance and the junior high school were two important results of this kind of thinking.

It appears, therefore, that the attempt to produce specified behavioral changes which can be measured and for which the processor can be held accountable is just one side of a coin, whose other side is the pacification of the new generation within specially engineered enclaves which will seduce them into the dream world of their elders. These pacified in society are well described by Dewey, who wants us to "make each one of our schools an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society, and permeate it with the *spirit* of art, history and science." In this historical perspective, it would

*See Joel Spring, *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State*, Cuaderno No. 50. Centro Intercultural de Documentación, Cuernavaca, Mexico, 1971.

67 IRRATIONAL CONSISTENCIES

be a grave mistake to interpret the current three-cornered controversy between the school establishment, the educational technologists and the free schools as the prelude to a revolution in education. This controversy reflects rather a stage of an attempt to escalate an old dream into fact, and to finally make all valuable learning the result of professional teaching. Most educational alternatives proposed converge toward goals which are immanent in the production of the cooperative man whose individual needs are met by means of his specialization in the American system: They are oriented toward the improvement of what--for lack of a better phrase--I call the schooled society. Even the seemingly radical critics of the school system are not willing to abandon the idea that they have an obligation to the young, especially to the poor, an obligation to process them, whether by love or by fear, into a society which needs disciplined specialization as much from its producers as from its consumers and also their full commitment to the ideology which puts economic growth first.

Dissent veils the contradictions inherent in the very idea of school. The established teachers unions, the technological wizards, and the educational liberation movement reinforce the commitment of the entire society to the fundamental axioms of a schooled world, somewhat in the manner in which many peace and protest movements reinforce the commitments of their members--be they black, female, young, or poor--to seek justice through the growth of the gross national income.

Some of the tenets which now go unchallenged are easy to list. There is, first, the shared belief that behavior which has been acquired in the sight of a pedagogue is of special value to the pupil and of special benefit to society. This is related to the assumption that social man is born only in adolescence, and properly born only if he matures in the school-womb, which some want to gentle by permissiveness, others to stuff

with gadgets, and still others to varnish with a liberal tradition. And there is, finally, a shared view of youth which is psychologically romantic and politically conservative. According to this view, changes in society must be brought about by burdening the young with the responsibility of transforming it-but only after their eventual

68 DESCHOOLING SOCIETY

release from school. It is easy for a society founded on such tenets to build up a sense of its responsibility for the education of the new generation, and this inevitably means that some men may set, specify, and evaluate the personal goals of others. In a "passage from an imaginary Chinese encyclopedia," Jorge Luis Borges tries to evoke the sense of giddiness such an attempt must produce. He tells us that animals are divided into the following classes: "(a) those belonging to the emperor, (b) those that are embalmed, (c) those that are domesticated, (d) the suckling pigs, (e) the sirens, (f) fabulous ones, (g) the roaming dogs, (h) those included in the present classification, (i) those that drive themselves crazy, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those painted with a very fine brush of camel hair, (l) et cetera, (m) those who have just broken the jug, (n) those who resemble flies from afar." Now, such a taxonomy does not come into being unless somebody feels it can serve his purpose: in this case, I suppose, that somebody was a tax collector. For him, at least, this taxonomy of beasts *must* have made sense, the same way in which the taxonomy of educational objectives makes sense to scientific authors.

In the peasant, the vision of men with such inscrutable logic, empowered to assess his cattle, must have induced a chilling sense of impotence. Students, for analogous reasons, tend to feel paranoiac when they seriously submit to a curriculum. Inevitably they are even more frightened than my imaginary Chinese peasant, because it is their life goals rather than their life-stock which is being branded with an inscrutable sign.

This passage of Borges is fascinating, because it evokes the logic of *irrational consistency* which makes Kafka's and Koestler's bureaucracies so sinister yet so evocative of everyday life. Irrational consistency mesmerizes accomplices who are engaged in mutually expedient and disciplined exploitation. It is the logic generated by bureaucratic behavior. And it becomes the logic of a society which demands that the managers of its educational institutions be held publicly accountable for the behavioral modification they produce in their clients. Students who can be motivated to value the educational packages which their teachers

69 IRRATIONAL CONSISTENCIES

obligate them to consume are comparable to Chinese peasants who can fit their flocks into the tax form provided by Borges.

At some time during the last two generations a commitment to therapy triumphed in American culture, and teachers came to be regarded as the therapists whose ministrations all men need, if they wish to enjoy the equality and freedom with which, according to the Constitution, they are born. Now the teacher-therapists go on to propose lifelong educational treatment as the next step. The *style* of this treatment is under discussion: Should it take the form of continued adult classroom attendance? Electronic ecstasy? Or periodic sensitivity sessions? All educators are ready to conspire to push out the walls of the classroom, with the goal of transforming the entire culture into a school.

The American controversy over the future of education, behind its rhetoric and noise, is more conservative than the discourse in other areas of public policy. On foreign affairs, at least, an organized minority constantly reminds us that the United States must renounce its role as the world's policeman. Radical economists, and now even their less radical teachers, question aggregate growth as a desirable goal. There are lobbies for prevention over cure in medicine and others in favor of fluidity over speed in transportation. Only in the field of education do the articulate voices demanding a radical deschooling of society remain so dispersed. There is a lack of cogent argument and of mature leadership aiming at the disestablishment of any and all institutions which serve the purpose of compulsory *learning*. For the moment, the radical deschooling of society is still a cause without a party. This is especially surprising in a time of growing, though chaotic, resistance to all forms of institutionally planned instruction on the part of those aged twelve to seventeen.

Educational innovators still assume that educational institutions function like funnels for the programs they package. For my argument it is irrelevant whether these funnels take the form of a classroom, a TV transmitter, or a "liberated zone." It is equally irrelevant whether the packages purveyed are rich or poor, hot or cold, hard and measurable (like Math III), or im-

70 DESCHOOLING SOCIETY

possible to assess (like sensitivity). What counts is that education is assumed to be the result of an institutional process managed by the educator. As long as the relations continue to be those between a supplier and a consumer, educational research will remain a circular process. It will amass scientific evidence in support of the need for more educational packages and for their more deadly accurate delivery to the individual customer, just as a certain brand of social science can prove the need for the delivery of more military treatment.

An educational revolution depends on a twofold inversion: a new orientation for research and a new understanding of the educational style of an emerging counterculture.

Operational research now seeks to optimize the efficiency of an inherited framework--a framework which is itself never questioned. This framework has the syntactic structure of a funnel for teaching packages. The syntactic alternative to it is an educational network or web for the autonomous assembly of resources under the personal control of each learner. This alternative structure of an educational institution now lies within the conceptual blind spot of our operational research. If research were to focus on it, this would constitute a true scientific revolution.

The blind spot of educational research reflects the cultural bias of a society in which technological growth has been confused with technocratic control. For the technocrat the value of an environment increases as more contacts between each man and his milieu can be programmed. In this world the choices which are manageable for the observer or planner converge with the choices possible for the observed so-called beneficiary. Freedom is reduced to a selection among packaged commodities.

The emerging counterculture reaffirms the values of semantic content above the efficiency of increased and more rigid syntax. It values the wealth of connotation above the power of syntax to produce wealth. It values the unpredictable outcome of self-chosen personal encounter

above the certified quality of professional instruction. This reorientation toward personal surprise rather than institutionally engineered values will be disruptive of the established order until we dissociate the increasing avail-

71 IRRATIONAL CONSISTENCIES

ability of technological tools which facilitate encounter from the increasing control of the technocrat of what happens when people meet.

Our present educational institutions are at the service of the teacher's goals. The relational structures we need are those which will enable each man to define himself by learning and by contributing to the learning of others.