

## Phenomenology of School

Some words become so flexible that they cease to be useful "School" and "teaching" are such terms. Like an amoeba they fit into almost any interstice of the language. ABM will teach the Russians, IBM will teach Negro children, and the army can become the school of a nation.

The search for alternatives in education must therefore start with an agreement on what it is we mean by "school." This might be done in several ways. We could begin by listing the latent functions performed by modern school systems, such as custodial care, selection, indoctrination, and learning. We could make a client analysis and verify which of these latent functions render a service or a disservice to teachers, employers, children, parents, or the professions. We could survey the history of Western culture and the information gathered by anthropology in order to find institutions which played a role like that now performed by schooling. We could, finally, recall the many normative statements which have been made since the time of Comenius, or even since Quintilian, and discover which of these the modern school system most closely approaches. But any of these approaches would oblige us to start with certain assumptions about a relationship between school and education. To develop a language in which we can speak about school without such constant recourse to education, I have chosen to begin with something that might be called a phenomenology of public school. For this purpose I shall define "school" as the age-specific, teacher-

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related process requiring full-time attendance at an obligatory curriculum.

1. *Age* School groups people according to age. This grouping rests on three unquestioned premises. Children belong in school.

Children learn in school. Children can be taught only in school. I think these unexamined premises deserve serious questioning. We have grown accustomed to children. We have decided that they should go to school, do as they are told, and have neither income nor families of their own. We expect them to know their place and behave like children. We remember, whether nostalgically or bitterly, a time when we were children, too. We are expected to tolerate the childish behavior of children. Man-kind, for us, is a species both afflicted and blessed with the task of caring for children. We forget, however, that our present concept of "childhood" developed only recently in Western Europe and more recently still in the Americas.\*

Childhood as distinct from infancy, adolescence, or youth was unknown to most historical periods. Some Christian centuries did not even have an eye for its bodily proportions. Artists depicted the infant as a miniature adult seated on his mother's arm. Children appeared in Europe along with the pocket watch and the Christian moneylenders of the Renaissance. Before our century neither the poor nor the rich knew of children's dress, children's games, or the child's immunity from the law. Childhood belonged to the bourgeoisie. The worker's child, the peasant's child, and the nobleman's child all dressed the way their fathers dressed, played the way their fathers played, and were hanged by the neck as were their fathers. After the discovery of "childhood" by the bourgeoisie all this changed. Only some churches continued to respect for some time the dignity and maturity of the young. Until the Second Vatican Council, each child was instructed that a Christian reaches moral discernment and freedom at the age of seven, and from then on is capable of committing sins for which

\* For parallel histories of modern capitalism and modern childhood see Philippe Aries, *Centuries Of Childhood*, Knopf, 1962.

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he may be punished by an eternity in Hell. Toward the middle of this century, middle-class parents began to try to spare their children the impact of this doctrine, and their thinking about children now prevails in the practice of the Church.

Until the last century, "children" of middle-class parents were made at home with the help of preceptors and private schools. Only with the advent of industrial society did the mass production of "childhood" become feasible and come within the reach of the masses. The school system is a modern phenomenon, as is the childhood it produces.

Since most people today live outside industrial cities, most people today do not experience childhood. In the Andes you till the soil once you have become "useful." Before that, you watch the sheep. If you are well nourished, you should be useful by eleven, and otherwise by twelve. Recently, I was talking to my night watchman, Marcos, about his eleven-year-old son who works in a barbershop. I noted in Spanish that his son was still a "*ni-o*," Marcos, surprised, answered with a guileless smile: "Don Ivan, I guess you're right." Realizing that until my remark the father had thought of Marcos primarily as his "son," I felt guilty for having drawn the curtain of childhood between two sensible persons. Of course if I were to tell the New York slum-dweller that his working son is still a "child," he would show no surprise. He knows quite well that his eleven-year-old son should be allowed childhood, and resents the fact that he is not. The son of Marcos has yet to be afflicted with the yearning for childhood; the New Yorker's son feels deprived.

Most people around the world, then, either do not want or cannot get modern childhood for their offspring. But it also seems that childhood is a burden to a good number of those few who are allowed it. Many of them are simply forced to go through it and are not at all happy playing the child's role. Growing up through childhood means being condemned to a process of in-human conflict between self-awareness and the role imposed by a society going through its own school age. Neither Stephen Daedalus nor Alexander Portnoy enjoyed childhood, and neither, I suspect, did many of us like to be treated as children.

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If there were no age-specific and obligatory learning institution, "childhood" would go out of production. The youth of rich nations would be liberated from its destructiveness, and poor nations would cease attempting to rival the childishness of the rich. If society were to outgrow its age of childhood, it would have to become livable for the young. The present disjunction between an adult society which pretends to be humane and a school environment which mocks reality could no longer be maintained.

The disestablishment of schools could also end the present discrimination against infants, adults, and the old in favor of children throughout their adolescence and youth. The social decision to allocate educational resources preferably to those citizens who have outgrown the extraordinary learning capacity of their first four years and have not arrived at the height of their self-motivated learning will, in retrospect, probably appear as bizarre.

Institutional wisdom tells us that children need school. Institutional wisdom tells us that children learn in school. But this institutional wisdom is itself the product of schools because sound common sense tells us that only children can be taught in school. Only by segregating human beings in the category of childhood could we ever get them to submit to the authority of a schoolteacher.

*2. Teachers and Pupils* By definition, children are pupils. The demand for the milieu of childhood creates an unlimited market for accredited teachers. School is an institution built on the axiom that learning is the result of teaching. And institutional wisdom continues to accept this axiom, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

We have all learned most of what we know outside school. Pupils do most of their learning without, and often despite, their teachers. Most tragically, the majority of men are taught their lesson by schools, even though they never go to school.

Everyone learns how to live outside school. We learn to speak, to think, to love, to feel, to play, to curse, to politick, and to work

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without interference from a teacher. Even children who are under a teacher's care day and night are no exception to the rule. Orphans, idiots, and schoolteachers' sons learn most of what they learn outside the "educational" process planned for them. Teachers have made a poor showing in their attempts at increasing learning among the poor. Poor parents who want their children to go to school are less concerned about what they will learn than about the certificate and money they will earn. And middle-class parents commit their children to a teacher's care to keep them from learning what the poor learn on the streets. Increasingly educational research demonstrates that children learn most of what teachers pretend to teach them from peer groups, from comics, from chance observations, and above all from mere participation in the ritual of school. Teachers, more often than not, obstruct such learning of subject matters as goes on in school.

Half of the people in our world never set foot in school. They have no contact with teachers, and they are deprived of the privilege of becoming dropouts. Yet they learn quite effectively the message which school teaches: that they should have school, and more and more of it. School instructs them in their own inferiority through the tax collector who makes them pay for it, or through the demagogue who raises their expectations of it, or through their children once the latter are hooked on it. So the poor are robbed of their self-respect by subscribing to a creed that grants salvation only through the school. At least the Church gave them a chance to repent at the hour of death. School leaves them with the expectation (a counterfeit hope) that their grandchildren will make it. That expectation is of course still more learning which comes from school but not from teachers.

Pupils have never credited teachers for most of their learning. Bright and dull alike have always relied on rote, reading, and wit to pass their exams, motivated by the stick or by the carrot of a desired career.

Adults tend to romanticize their schooling. In retrospect, they attribute their learning to the teacher whose patience they

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learned to admire. But the same adults would worry about the mental health of a child who rushed home to tell them what he learned from his every teacher.

Schools create jobs for schoolteachers, no matter what their pupils learn from them.

*3. Full-Time Attendance* Every month I see another list of proposals made by some U.S. industry to AID, suggesting the replacement of Latin-American "classroom practitioners" either by disciplined systems administrators or just by TV. In the United States teaching as a team enterprise of educational researchers, designers, and technicians is gaining acceptance. But, no matter whether the teacher is a schoolmarm or a team of men in white coats, and no matter whether they succeed in teaching the subject matter listed in the catalogue or whether they fail, the professional teacher creates a sacred milieu.

Uncertainty about the future of professional teaching puts the classroom into jeopardy. Were educational professionals to specialize in promoting learning, they would have to abandon a system which calls for between 750 and 1,000 gatherings a year. But of course teachers do a lot more. The institutional wisdom of schools tells parents, pupils, and educators that the teacher, if he is to teach, must exercise his authority in a sacred precinct. This is true even for teachers whose pupils spend most of their school time in a classroom without walls.

School, by its very nature, tends to make a total claim on the time and energies of its participants. This, in turn, makes the teacher into custodian, preacher, and therapist.

In each of these three roles the teacher bases his authority on a different claim. The *teacher-as-custodian* acts as a master of ceremonies, who guides his pupils through a drawn-out labyrinthine ritual. He arbitrates the observance of rules and administers the intricate rubrics of

initiation to life. At his best, he sets the stage for the acquisition of some skill as schoolmasters always have. Without illusions of producing any profound learning, he drills his pupils in some basic routines.

The *teacher-as-moralist* substitutes for parents, God, or the

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state. He indoctrinates the pupil about what is right or wrong, not only in school but also in society at large. He stands *in loco parentis* for each one and thus ensures that all feel themselves children of the same state.

The *teacher-as-therapist* feels authorized to delve into the personal life of his pupil in order to help him grow as a person. When this function is exercised by a custodian and preacher, it usually means that he persuades the pupil to submit to a domestication of his vision of truth and his sense of what is right.

The claim that a liberal society can be founded on the modern school is paradoxical. The safeguards of individual freedom are all canceled in the dealings of a teacher with his pupil. When the schoolteacher fuses in his person the functions of judge, ideologue, and doctor, the fundamental style of society is perverted by the very process which should prepare for life. A teacher who combines these three powers contributes to the warping of the child much more than the laws which establish his legal or economic minority, or restrict his right to free assembly or abode.

Teachers are by no means the only professionals who offer therapy. Psychiatrists, guidance counselors, and job counselors, even lawyers, help their clients to decide, to develop their personalities, and to learn. Yet common sense tells the client that such professionals should abstain from imposing their opinion of what is right or wrong, or from forcing anyone to follow their advice. Schoolteachers and ministers are the only professionals who feel entitled to pry into the private affairs of their clients at the same time as they preach to a captive audience.

Children are protected by neither the First nor the Fifth Amendment when they stand before that secular priest, the teacher. The child must confront a man who wears an invisible triple crown, like the papal tiara, the symbol of triple authority combined in one person. For the child, the teacher pontificates as pastor, prophet, and priest—he is at once guide, teacher, and administrator of a sacred ritual. He combines the claims of medieval popes in a society constituted under the guarantee that these claims shall never be exercised together by one established and obligatory institution—church or state.

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Defining children as full-time pupils permits the teacher to exercise a kind of power over their persons which is much less limited by constitutional and consuetudinal restrictions than the power wielded by the guardians of other social enclaves. Their chronological age disqualifies children from safeguards which are routine for adults in a modern asylum-madhouse, monastery, or jail.

Under the authoritative eye of the teacher, several orders of value collapse into one. The distinctions between morality, legal. ity, and personal worth are blurred and eventually eliminated. Each transgression is made to be felt as a multiple offense. The offender is expected to feel that he has broken a rule, that he has behaved immorally, and that he has let himself down. A pupil who adroitly obtains assistance on an exam is told that he is an outlaw, morally corrupt, and personally worthless.

Classroom attendance removes children from the everyday world of Western culture and plunges them into an environment far more primitive, magical, and deadly serious. School could not create such an enclave within which the rules of ordinary reality are suspended, unless it physically incarcerated the young during many successive years on sacred territory. The attendance rule makes it possible for the schoolroom to serve as a magic womb, from which the child is delivered periodically at the school days and school year's completion until he is finally expelled into adult life. Neither universal extended childhood nor the smothering atmosphere of the classroom could exist without schools. Yet schools, as compulsory channels for learning, could exist without either and be more repressive and destructive than anything we have come to know. To understand what it means to deschool society, and not just to reform the educational establishment, we must now focus on the hidden curriculum of schooling. We are not concerned here, directly, with the hidden curriculum of the ghetto streets which brands the poor or with the hidden curriculum of the drawing room which benefits the rich. We are rather concerned to call attention to the fact that the ceremonial or ritual of schooling itself constitutes such a hidden curriculum. Even the best of teachers cannot entirely protect his pupils from

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it. Inevitably, this hidden curriculum of schooling adds prejudice and guilt to the discrimination which a society practices against some of its members and compounds the privilege of others with a new title to condescend to the majority. Just as inevitably, this hidden curriculum serves as a ritual of initiation into a growth-oriented consumer society for rich and poor alike.