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Whose Children? Rethinking Schools and Education

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While our American school system may have the appearance of a static and unchanging institution, it is not. "Fix our failing schools!" has been the steady mantra from school reformers of all stripes for a hundred years. Convinced that the Civil War would not have happened if there had been a public education system to help us understand one another, public school advocates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lobbied state legislatures to fund schools and pass laws to compel attendance. Inspired by the success of school reformers of 17th century totalitarian Prussia, these visionaries successfully reproduced the government controlled German system that appeared to render obedient citizens with morals and academics. Government, however, was the latecomer in education. Driven by different objectives, the Church, parents, and finally the government have historically sought to control the educational system in European countries and later here in America. A balance today in education between historical expectations, differing objectives, and individual rights, is a futile effort because we have adopted a system intended for a totalitarian state, not our pluralistic and democratic society.

When Mark Twain quipped, "I have never let my schooling interfere with my education" (Twain, n.d.), what did he mean? Is there a difference between "school" and "education"? Dr. Brian Ray, President of National Home Education Research Institute, defines academic schooling as a small part of the overall life-education of a child, which also includes the child's philosophy, morals, manners, and usefulness in his or her community (personal communication, March 9, 2010). Public school advocate Christopher Lubienski, Associate Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-

Champaign, noted "an emerging recognition of the difference between 'public education' and 'public schools'" (Lubienski, 2003, p. 478). Yet we often say "education system" when we really mean "school system", or "compulsory education" when we actually mean "compulsory school attendance". All fifty states compel school attendance, but not one has a law requiring an education for a child. The debate we have today over schools and education has not occurred spontaneously.

Our modern compulsory public school system is traced to pre-Enlightenment Prussia (current-day Germany) when Martin Luther considered popular education to be a crucial component to the success of the Reformation. Protestant town councils passed ordinances forming schools of religious indoctrination, and Catholic princes followed suit, shocked by the rapid spread of Protestantism (Melton, 1988, p. 5). But these Protestant and Catholic schools merely provided instruction in the articles of faith with reliance on oral recitation, music, and memorization of catechisms. Literacy was less than 10% in many places, prompting parents to respond by forming small "Winkelschulen", secret schools that were both non-franchised and illegal. Teaching utilitarian "three Rs" academics, these popular "corner" or "hidden" schools taught both boys and girls alike, and by the late 1500s were competitive to the state sanctioned religious schools (Friedrichs, 1982, p. 372).

Societal deterioration in the mid 1600s caused by the Thirty Years War, a revival of mysticism, a recalcitrant laity, and poor school attendance, spurred a demand for a spiritual reawakening. Phillip Jacob Spener began a small Sunday and Wednesday evening Bible study in his home in 1670, teaching piety and social activism. Believing that "True Christians fulfilled their obligations voluntarily and through conviction, not

mechanically or through coercion" (Melton, 1988, p. 27), Pietists soon gained a widespread following. Pietist August Hermann Francke, convinced that Christian education was the only effective antidote to the moral depravity, and Johann Julius Hecker after him, established hundreds of schools and several teacher training schools that were noted for their piety and orderliness (Melton, 1988, pp. 24-54).

The spiritual rebirth of the individual child was the primary goal of Pietist schools, which were characterized by a strong work ethic, inward piety, compulsory attendance once enrolled, and comparatively mild discipline for its day. To obtain obedience and compliance, parental influence was discouraged as institutional control was intensified to assist in breaking the child's natural will. Innovations of the era included the grouping of students according to ability, raising hands to ask questions, and vocational schools. Literacy was emphasized to encourage the reading of the Bible (Melton, 1988, pp. 38-44).

These successes, a "mixture of piety and utility" (Melton, 1988, p. 38) would not have been possible without the enthusiastic approval of the king. While the traditional concerns for the instillation of morality by the school was important, the king's officials were most interested in the Pietist work ethic and social conduct outcomes for their economic and political value to the government. Cameralism, the predecessor to today's field of public administration, had as its primary aim the "consolidation of the political and administrative power" of absolutist princes (Spicer, 1998, p. 151). One byproduct of Pietist schooling was productive members of society, and though it was a parent's duty to educate their children, cameralists felt that the common good to society was so important that "the state cannot afford to leave it solely in the hands of the

family" (Melton, 1988, p. 114), thereby making it a state responsibility. Cameralists held that education was the mediator between obedience to the state and freedom, and was good for the internalization of social duty (Melton, 1988, p. 137). When Frederick the Great signed the very first comprehensive compulsory school law in 1763, he also assumed responsibility for all schools within his kingdom, including church schools. The transition of educational responsibility from the parent, to the church, and now to the state, was complete.

School reformers in the United States and Britain looked admiringly at the German systems. Kenneth Barkin, Professor of History at UC Riverside, notes that Prussia was a precursor of much that is associated with the modernization of schooling (Barkin, 1983, p. 50). John Quincy Adams, US President from 1825 to 1829, wrote in 1804 that Prussian schools aimed "not merely to load the memory of their scholars with words, but to make things intelligible to their understanding" (Barkin, 1983, p. 41). In 1842, British author William Howitt, after a sojourn to Germany, dedicated a chapter of his book regarding schools saying, "This glorious advance in the true science of government has raised no little sensation throughout Europe..." (Howitt, 1842, p. 485). Horace Mann, the "father of American public education", said Prussian children were "taught to think for themselves" (Barkin, 1983, p. 41), whereas Massachusetts children were "taught NOT TO THINK [his emphasis]" (Barkin, 1983, p. 47). Writing about the Prussian cameralist system that included state controlled schools in 1887, Woodrow Wilson, US President from 1913 to 1921, felt that the US could have a similar system without absolutism; economist Friedrich Hayek later disagreed in 1944, saying such a government "would inevitably become totalitarian in character" (Spicer, 1998, p. 158).

There were, and are, several justifications used to rationalize governmental involvement in schools. In 1965 British liberal economist E. G. West wrote a book called *Education and the State; A Study in Political Economy*, a book that reexamined the historical data and arguments used by educational pioneers to justify compulsory education. By applying to education Buchanan and Tullock's public choice theory, which he called the economic theory of bureaucracy, he stunned the educational establishment with his findings. James Tooley, biographer and understudy of West, noted the ferocity of West's detractors: "an ill-tempered Chesterton on an off-night", "stagnant little academic backwater", "an academic cul de sac", and others (Tooley, 2008, p. 193). Others praised it: "most important work written on the subject this century", "few books more worth serious attention by educationists", "turning orthodox doctrine inside out, has effected a Copernican revolution" (Tooley, 2008, p. 193). One professor's ad hominem against West was so derisive, terming the book "Copernican in reverse", "verbal rubbish", and "pernicious", (Tooley, 2008, p. 195), that the book's publisher sued for libel, and won. West was forced out of his university position, and relocated from England to Canada, where he spent the rest of his life researching and writing.

What did West say that bothered the establishment so much? By conducting a lot of original research and re-analysis of existing data, West effectively dismantled the case that government should have any involvement in schools whatsoever, if education is the true objective. He argued that government's participation in anything, including schools, includes a combination of regulation, funding, and provision (Tooley, 2008, p. 169). An example of government providing a solely regulatory function would be the

requirement that if you drive a car you must have car insurance. The state regulates, but the state does not fund your insurance, nor does it provide it through a state office of insurance. Likewise, for an example of regulation and funding but no provision, the government could potentially have a regulation that compels school, and fund it by giving you money either through a voucher or tax credit system. The government wouldn't provide schools, and you would be responsible to find a private school, or do it yourself by homeschooling your child. In that scenario, the government wouldn't own a single school or school bus, or pay a single teacher. Though it regulates and funds schooling, it would not physically provide the service.

West decimated the arguments that the government, and not the market driven by parents and industry, was the best provider of schools for children. With the cool eye of an objective economist, West wondered if government schools were the best protectors of children, and questioned if the other external benefits that government education supposedly generates could not be provided cheaper and better by non-government sources. Externalities he oppugned included accepted arguments that government education is needed to make democracy work, government education reduces crime, government education provides equality of opportunity, government education provides social cohesion, government education is needed for our national defense, and that government education causes economic growth (Tooley, 2008, pp. 47-78).

Most significant to this discussion is West's comparison of the two types of compulsion: selective and universal (West, 2003a, p. 82). An example of selective compulsion would be the intervention of governmental Child Protective Services on the

report of a child being nutritionally neglected. The law that requires you to feed your child is not a universal compulsory law; if it were the law the government would inspect your pantry on a daily basis and require proof that food was provided regularly to your child. Universality requires a policing on the part of the government to ensure that everyone will follow the law (West, 2003a, p. 90). Selectivity requires action on the part of the government only on reports or discovery of cause. West clarifies that universal is "legislation that is embodied in a statute about compulsion per se", which is distinguished from "the type of compulsion that is usually implicit in ordinary child-abuse laws that attempt to deal with cases on a more ad hoc basis" (West, 2003a, p. 108). He states simply, "Ideally, compulsion should be selective and not universal" (West, 2003a, p. 91).

The question is begged: Which would the government consider more serious, a half-starved child or a half-educated child? Summarizing the argument in 1875 of Joseph Chamberlain, a pro-universal compulsion school law advocate; food is necessary and schooling is not, therefore there is no need to have a compulsory food law (West, 2003a, p. 103). But since most children already attended school, it was easy to pass a law that people were already complying with. Quoting a conclusion of a 1972 regression analysis by Landes and Solmon, "...the vast majority of school age persons had already been obtaining a level of schooling equal to or greater than what was to be later specified in statute" (West, 2003a, p. 87). There was no need, if the objective was to provide an education for children, for governmental involvement in schools since parents, churches, and charities were already meeting the demand.

School bureaucrats, teachers, and cameralist-thinking government bureaucrats, were primarily responsible for creating the "crisis" to get school legislation passed. West notes that the British, who followed a path similar to the US with "free" public schooling and compulsory laws occurring nearly simultaneously, may have been "more manipulated than consulted" (West, 2003a, p. 106) when their compulsory school attendance laws were passed. Matthew Arnold, a British school inspector in 1867, thought a compulsory law was not appropriate for England, "In Prussia, which is so often quoted, education is not flourishing because it is compulsory. It is compulsory because it is flourishing" (West, 2003a, p. 92). After noting that the history of public school governance in the US and Prussia has been "remarkably similar" (Herbst, 2002, p. 318), Jurgen Herbst, a professor of history and education policy who grew up in Nazi Germany, states, "The issue of state-sponsored education, however, was contentious from the beginning and has remained so for two centuries" (Herbst, 2002, p. 322).

All of this prompts the most obvious question; When parents have children, whose children are they? What were, and are, the objectives of the parents, the Church, and of the state when it comes to a child's education?

Parents will always be the foremost advocates for the best interests of their children, with very few exceptions. In Prussia, parents sent their children to Winkelschulen when it became clear the children were not learning to read at the state recognized church schools. After the Protestant Pietist movement the Church got on board with literacy, recognizing it as a required skill for strengthening the faith. Administrators within the government, many of whom were Pietists themselves, recognized the benefits of the school experiment for the state. Working with the

Pietists, a system of government church schools was built. Parents acquiesced to this church and state involvement because their values were being taught in the school, as well as practical skills. This was also largely true in American public schools before a series of Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s that took morality out of the schools entirely. Although some subcultures in American society today adhere to a patriarchal family structure where children are effectively owned by the parents, the more prevalent modern parent-child relationship is similar to a "fiduciary" power, granted by society, that can be removed in cases of abuse (Tooley, 2008, p. 48). Parental objectives in education have remained the same over the ages; help the child find a skill that he/she can succeed in life with, develop the child morally and spiritually with parental values to secure their eternity, and teach the child the family heritage. Isabel Paterson reacted to the state's current role, "There can be no greater stretch of arbitrary power than is required to seize children from their parents, teach them whatever the authorities decree they shall be taught, and expropriate from the parents the funds to pay for the procedure" (Paterson, 1943, p. 255).

The Church, historically either Protestant or Catholic for this discussion, has considered schooling a critical means to convey their soul-saving messages. The more worldly objectives of parents are clearly secondary objectives to the Church; Carper and Hunt note the Church's position that true education includes physical, moral, religious, and intellectual development, but the three Rs "given man's supernatural destiny, are the 'least important part of education'" (Carper, Hunt, 2007, p. 45). Even Martin Luther, while recognizing popular education as crucial to the Reformation's success, was ambivalent about literacy for the laity (Melton, 1988, pp. 4,9), feeling that rote

memorization, catechisms, and music were more important. In modern times in the US, with their political influence largely disestablished, churches that previously supported public schools have begun to open private schools and support homeschooling after the aforementioned 1960s Supreme Court decisions. In this role today Christian churches of all denominations are joining with parents to reassert parental rights and authority in the home. "The current structure of public education," assert the Protestant James Carper and Catholic Thomas Hunt, "is incompatible with America's confessional pluralism and our sacred commitment to universal liberty of conscience in matters of education and religion" (Carper, Hunt, 2007, p. 5).

Governmental objectives in education are far less defined, and much more debated. The case that the government can do a better job of imparting knowledge to children has been disproven innumerable times. In his quantitative meta-analysis that examined the outcomes of hundreds of studies on the effects of religiosity and religious schools on academic outcomes, William Jeynes proves that religious instruction in conjunction with academics improves academics, with private and home schools outperforming public schools in nearly every category. Yet he notes, "Nevertheless, the present atmosphere of America's public schools appears to discourage rather than encourage religiosity" (Jeynes, 2003, p. 238). Government school advocates use externality arguments, not academic excellence, to justify their involvement in education. One such externality argues for social cohesion in society, an argument that was and is still being used to justify public schools. After the Civil War the U.S. started to nationalize, and public schools "came to be looked upon by many as the leading means whereby national unity could be achieved and maintained" (Carper, Hunt, 2007,

p. 77). Mary Novello, education advocate and lecturer, likens public education to a three-legged stool; leg one is the preservation of a culture that depends on educating its citizens, leg two is compulsion to make children attend, and leg three is convincing the public that "parents are incapable of or unwilling to take responsibility for providing their children's education and that specially trained teachers are a necessity" (Novello, 1998, pp. 102-105). Of course one must first question whose culture is being preserved after reviewing the plight of Native American tribes and cultures. The real intent is to Americanize, or even homogenize, all citizens, especially new immigrants (West, 2003b, p. 126). Another externality of public schools is our national defense, with the argument that an educated warrior is the most important weapon that any country can have. While the merits of this argument may be debatable, the question resurfaces about the ability of government schools to provide the best academic education. As John Hood, research director for the John Locke Foundation, notes,

When government policy continues to impose rigid personnel rules, bureaucracy, regulations, and a mandate to use education to engineer social or political outcomes, a school cannot successfully impart the needed skills, knowledge, and perspective to its students - whether these students choose to be there or not. (Hood, 1993, p. 45)

The list of these "external benefits", which are apart from imparting knowledge to children, is extensive and is debated throughout all educational literature. With today's technology and communication, many of them are outdated or have been proved insufficient to justify governmental intervention in schools.

Throughout this discourse the impact of a Prussian-style compulsory school system on individual rights and liberties in a free society has been alluded to. John Holt, an advocate for home education in the 1970s and 1980s, was an outspoken advocate for the right of the child to determine what, when, who, where, and how they got their education. Countless others have questioned the contradictory concept of compulsion by the state in a free society. The roots of a child-centered education begin with philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), whose impact on education and the world can hardly be over-estimated. Indeed, Mary Novello states,

It may strain the imagination to regard one man, a slightly demented philosopher of the eighteenth century, as the inventor of childhood, the inspiration for the founders of progressive education, the starting point for the Romantic movement, an early collectivist, the intelligent force behind the French revolution, and the founder of nationalism, but Rousseau cannot be denied any of those positions. (Novello, 1998, p. 93)

Novello establishes the impact of Rousseau's progressive philosophy on current American education, a philosophy that requires all social order to be under the control of the state, which in turn requires state education to convince citizens that this is true freedom. She wryly notes that in Russia and China "...the populace was granted the unfettered freedom of becoming subservient to the state" (Novello, 1998, p. 74).

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632-1704), and Rousseau all subscribed to the concept of a social contract, where a person born into a society has an obligation to that society and must sacrifice some personal freedoms in order for the society to

maintain stability. The current debates in academia on the benefits of compulsory public schooling are all rooted in this theory.

The crisis in American education today is the result of blindly throwing money and legislation at an institution that doesn't serve the parents of children, the Church, the state, and most importantly the children themselves who are compelled to participate. Nobel prize winning physicist Albert Einstein (1879-1955), who was born and schooled in Germany, said in 1946,

It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wreck and ruin without fail. It is a very grave mistake to think that the enjoyment of seeing and searching can be promoted by means of coercion and a sense of duty. (Einstein, 1949, p. 17)

The objectives of all parties in our American society can be better attained if we return to the principles of individual responsibility and liberty by disestablishing the state monopoly in education. John Hood states, "By any reasonable measure, America's monopolistic, bureaucratic, over-regulated system of public schools is woefully unprepared to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century" (Hood, 1993, p. 50), and concludes that political, business, and education leaders should be discussing replacing, not reforming, the present system. His advice should be heeded. Compulsion and coercion, the trademarks of totalitarian governments and our government public school systems, are anathema to true education.

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