



#67 Public Schools, the Fixation of Belief, and Social Control

The advent of compulsory public schooling in the West is often viewed as a sign of progress, a development which granted all individuals an equal opportunity to become educated, cultivate one's cognitive faculties, and improve one's position in life.

But this optimistic view is not shared by all. Rather many who have studied the history of public education have concluded that its primary role, from the beginning, was not to uplift and enlighten, but to act (***)as a form of social control.

The great American writer H.L. Mencken encapsulated this view:

“The most erroneous assumption is to the effect that the aim of public education is to fill the young of the species with knowledge and awaken their intelligence... Nothing could be further from the truth. The aim of public education is not to spread enlightenment at all; it is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality. That is its aim in the United States, whatever the pretensions of politicians...and that is its aim everywhere else.” (H.L. Mencken)

The roots of compulsory education reach back to Ancient Greece where Spartan children were taken from their parents and housed in military schools under the ideal of cultivating total obedience to the Spartan state. The more modern form of compulsory public schooling, however, originated in the 16th century.

In 1524, Martin Luther, a primary figure in the Protestant Revolution – which amounted to a rejection of the Roman Catholic Church in favor of the Bible as the sole authority of truth – wrote a letter to the German leaders of the time, urging them to institute a mandatory schooling system. Luther's letter reads as follows:

“I maintain that the civil authorities are under obligation to compel the people to send their children to school.... If the government can compel such citizens as are fit for military service to bear spear and rifle...and perform other martial



duties in time of war, how much more has it a right to compel the people to send their children to school, because in this case we are warring with the devil, whose object it is secretly to exhaust our cities and principalities of their strong men.” (Martin Luther)

Luther understood that compulsory schooling could be used to indoctrinate young minds into the Lutheran Church, and sought to use State power to achieve this end. As a result of his pleadings, numerous German states created the first modern public schools.

In many ways Martin Luther can be thought of marking the birth of the modern schooling system. Not only was he the first advocate of compulsory schooling, but his conviction that the State should use its power to indoctrinate its citizens into a specific worldview, helped stimulate in Germany a climate of increasing subjugation to the State.

The great historian Lord Acton wrote of Martin Luther that he “*impressed on his party that character of political dependence, and that habit of passive obedience to the State.*”

Another important step in the rise of modern public schooling arose under King William I of Prussia who ruled from 1713 to 1740. Integral to the maintenance of Prussia’s powerful army during his reign was the national compulsory schooling system he established in 1717, the first of its kind in Europe. Subsequent schooling reforms throughout the 18th century built on this foundation and paved the way towards the development of what came to known as the factory model of schooling.

In her book *Raising a School*, Rena Upitis, the former Dean of Education at Queen’s University in Canada, explained some of the features of the factory model of schooling, which continues to be the dominant model of public schooling in the West today:

“In factory schools, teaching—like the buildings—tends to be boxlike and linear. Transmission teaching dominates: standing at the front of the classroom, the teacher transmits knowledge to the students. This kind of teaching works best



when the teacher can see everyone at once, and so, classrooms are created as a series of boxes, the most pervasive example being one of double-loaded classrooms down a single long hallway.” (Raising a School, Rena Upitis)

The factory model of schooling emphasizes standardization of teaching, testing, and learning rates, respect for authority over the exploration of truth, and uniformity and orthodoxy over innovation and progress.

This schooling model developed by the Prussians was so efficient at inculcating into its citizens a worldview which benefited the Prussian State, that in the 19th century educational reformers in the United States caught wind of it, and quickly sought to implement it in their home country.

Both Calvin Stowe, one of the leading American professional educationists in the 19th century, and Horace Mann, dubbed by historians as the “Father of the American Public School System”, traveled to Prussia to investigate their schooling system first hand. Upon their return both lobbied heavily, and successfully, for the adoption of factory model schools in the United States.

Under the influence of Mann, Stowe, and other educational reformers, many American states quickly began to develop state-sponsored compulsory schooling systems which crowded out the prevailing system of private and philanthropic schools already in existence. In 1852 Massachusetts was the first to adopt such a system, and by 1900 practically all the states had followed.

Compulsory schooling elsewhere in the West followed a similar trajectory and timeline. In 1900 every country in Europe had established compulsory schooling except for Belgium, which followed in 1920. England, after much opposition, implemented compulsory schooling in the late 19th century. And Canada quickly accompanied America in implementing a system based on the factory model developed in Prussia.

Many of the educational reformers who influenced the development of compulsory schooling were not looking to stimulate innovation, invention and the development of ideas to promote social prosperity, but were in search of an effective means of social control and social engineering.



Ellwood Cubberley, Head of Stanford's School of Education and influential reformer, for example, wrote in his 1916 book *Public School Administration*:

“Our schools are, in a sense, factories, in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of twentieth-century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down.” (Public School Administration, Ellwood Cubberley)

William Torrey Harris, the United States Commissioner of Education in the late 19th century, and steadfast believer that the child was the absolute property of the government, wrote in his book (**)*The Philosophy of Education*:

“Ninety-nine [students] out of a hundred are automata, careful to walk in prescribed paths, careful to follow the prescribed custom. This is not an accident but the result of substantial education which, scientifically defined, is the subsumption of the individual.” (The Philosophy of Education, William Torrey Harris)

Frederick Taylor Gates, business advisor to John D. Rockefeller, who in 1903 founded the General Education Board which provided major funding for schools and was a big supporter of state-controlled compulsory schooling, wrote in his 1913 book *“The Country School of Tomorrow”*:

“In our dream...the people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hand...We shall not try to make these people or any of their children into philosophers or men of learning or of science. We are not to raise up from among them authors, orators, poets, or men of letters. We shall not search for embryo great artists, painters, musicians. Nor will we cherish even the humbler ambition to raise up from among them lawyers, doctors, preachers, politicians, statesmen, of whom we now have ample supply...For the task that we set before ourselves is a very simple as well as a very beautiful one: to train these people as we find them for a perfectly ideal life just where they are...an idyllic life



under the skies and within the horizon, however narrow, where they first open their eyes.” (The Country School of Tomorrow, Frederick Taylor Gates)

To keep the student confined to a narrow horizon, or in the words of Mencken, to use compulsory schooling to “breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality”, was the goal of many of the most influential educational reformers.

To understand just how efficient the factory model of schooling was, and continues to be, at achieving this goal on a mass scale, we can turn to an interesting essay titled “The Fixation of Belief” by the prominent philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. In the essay Peirce explained how it was possible “to fix belief, not in the individual, but in the community”, via what he called the “method of authority”:

“Let the will of the state act, then, instead of that of the individual. Let an institution be created which shall have for its object to keep correct doctrines before the attention of the people, to reiterate them perpetually, and to teach them to the young; having at the same time power to prevent contrary doctrines from being taught, advocated, or expressed. Let all possible causes of a change of mind be removed from men’s apprehensions. Let them be kept ignorant, lest they should learn of some reason to think otherwise than they do. Let their passions be enlisted, so that they may regard private and unusual opinions with hatred and horror.” (The Fixation of Belief, Charles Sanders Peirce)

One would be hard pressed to think of a better system for fixing belief for the purpose of breeding and training a standardized citizenry, than the factory model schooling system, in existence in the West since the late 19th century.

As Ivan Illich wrote in his book, *Deschooling society*:

“School is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is.” (Deschooling Society, Ivan Illich)



It is not surprising that a study of 400 eminent 20th century men and women, detailed in the book *Cradles of Eminence*, found that three out of every five of them “had serious school problems”. Those individuals who yearn to push boundaries, explore and create ideas, invent, and innovate, will not easily bend to a system which attempts “to put down dissent and originality”.

Albert Einstein, for example, found schooling so suffocating – requiring in his words “the obedience of a corpse” – that upon passing an exam he had previously failed he found he had no desire to think about scientific problems for an entire year.

Ignoring for a moment the sinister motives which lay behind the development of factory model schooling in the West, its inadequacy as an institution is conditioned upon its tendency to not only fail to stimulate curiosity, but to inhibit or even stamp out altogether the natural curiosity exhibited by all children.

Stuck within the confines of what Rena Upitis described as “Windowless concrete containers, surrounded by barbed wire fences – looking more like prisons than schools”, students are for the most part not encouraged to explore, create, and cultivate independence, but to sit down, listen, and accept at face value whatever is being taught.

We’ll conclude with a passage from John Taylor Gatto, former New York City and New York state teacher of the year, who upon resigning out of frustration over the faults he believed to be embedded in the very essence of modern schooling, wrote a series of books on the history and nature of compulsory schooling.

The following is a short passage from his book *Dumbing us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*, in which he makes a sharp distinction between what today is called schooling, and what an education should really consist of:

“Whatever an education is, it should make you a unique individual, not a conformist; it should furnish you with an original spirit with which to tackle the big challenges; it should allow you to find values which will be your road map through life; it should make you spiritually rich, a person who loves whatever



you are doing...it should teach you what is important: how to live and how to die.” (Dumbing us Down, John Taylor Gatto)