
CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES: The Tyranny Of Compulsory Schooling

by
John Taylor Gatto



John Taylor Gatto was the New York State Teacher of the Year, 1991 (New York State Education Dept.), New York City Teacher of the Year, 1991 (Alliance for Public Education), New York State Teacher of the Year, First Runner-Up, 1990 (New York State Education Dept.), New York City Teacher of the Year, 1990 (N.Y. State Senate Resolution), New York City Teacher of the Year, 1989 (Council of Chief State School Officers; National Association of Secondary School Principals) Author: *DUMBING US DOWN: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*; *THE EXHAUSTED SCHOOL: A National Speakout on School Choice*; *THE AMERICAN FAMILY MASQUERADE: The Effects of Social Engineering on American Life*.

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JOHN TAYLOR GATTO

Let me speak to you about dumbness because that is what schools teach best. Old-fashioned dumbness used to be simple ignorance: you didn't know something, but there were ways to find out if you wanted to. Government-controlled schooling didn't eliminate dumbness — in fact, we now know that people read more fluently *before* we had forced schooling — but dumbness was transformed.

Now dumb people aren't just ignorant; they're the victims of the non-thought of secondhand ideas. Dumb people are now well-informed about the opinions of *Time* magazine and CBS, *The New York Times* and the President; their job is to choose which pre-thought thoughts, which received opinions, they like best. The elite in this new empire of ignorance are those who know the most pre-thought thoughts.

Mass dumbness is vital to modern society. The dumb person is wonderfully flexible clay for psychological

shaping by market research, government policymakers, public-opinion leaders, and any other interest group. The more pre-thought thoughts a person has memorized, the easier it is to predict what choices he or she will make. What dumb people cannot do is think for themselves or ever be alone for very long without feeling crazy. That is the whole point of national forced schooling; we aren't supposed to be able to think for ourselves because independent thinking gets in the way of "professional" thinking, which is believed to follow rules of scientific precision.

Modern scientific stupidity masquerades as intellectual knowledge — which it is not. Real knowledge has to be earned by hard and painful thinking; it can't be generated in group discussions or group therapies but only in lonely sessions with yourself. Real knowledge is earned only by ceaseless questioning of yourself and others, and by the labor of independent verification; you can't buy it from a government agent, a social worker, a psychologist, a licensed specialist, or a schoolteacher. There isn't a public school in this country set up to allow the discovery of real knowledge — not even the best ones — although here and there individual teachers, like guerrilla fighters, sabotage the system and work toward this ideal. But since schools are set up to classify people rather than to see them as unique, even the best schoolteachers are strictly limited in the amount of questioning they can tolerate.

The new dumbness — the non-thought of received ideas — is much more dangerous than simple ignorance, because it's really about thought control. In school, a washing away of the innate power of individual mind takes place, a "cleansing" so comprehensive that original thinking becomes difficult. If you don't believe this development was part of the intentional design of schooling, you should read William Torrey Harris's *The Philosophy of Education*. Harris was the U.S. Commissioner of Education at the turn of the century and the man most influential in standardizing our schools. Listen to the man.

"Ninety-nine [students] out of a hundred," writes Harris, "are automata, careful to walk in prescribed paths, careful to follow the prescribed custom." This is

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Twenty-six years of award-winning teaching have led John Gatto to some troubling conclusions about the public schools.

A seventh-grade teacher, Gatto has been named New York City Teacher of the Year and New York State Teacher of the Year. Praised by leaders as diverse as Ronald Reagan and Mario Cuomo, he's a political maverick whose views defy easy categorization.

not an accident, Harris explains, but the "result of substantial education, which, scientifically defined, is the subsumption of the individual."

Scientific education subsumes the individual until his or her behavior becomes robotic. Those are the thoughts of the most influential U.S. Commissioner of Education we've had so far.

The great theological scholar Dietrich Bonhoeffer raised this issue of the new dumbness in his brilliant analysis of Nazism, in which he sought to comprehend how the best-schooled nation in the world, Germany, could fall under its sway. He concluded that Nazism could be understood *only* as the psychological product of good schooling. The sheer weight of received ideas, pre-thought thoughts, was so overwhelming that individuals gave up trying to assess things for themselves. Why struggle to invent a map of the world or of the human conscience when schools and media offer thousands of ready-made maps, pre-thought thoughts?

The new dumbness is particularly deadly to middle- and upper-middle-class people, who have already been made shallow by the multiple requirements to conform. Too many people, uneasily convinced that they must know something because of a degree, diploma, or license, remain so convinced until a brutal divorce, alienation from their children, loss of employment, or periodic fits of meaninglessness manage to tip the precarious mental balance of their incomplete humanity, their stillborn adult lives.

Listen to William Harris again, the dark genius of American schooling, the man who gave you scientifically age-graded classrooms:

The great purposes of school can be realized *better* in dark, airless, ugly places than in beautiful halls. It is to master the physical self, to transcend the beauty of nature. School should develop the power to withdraw from the external world.

Harris thought, a hundred years ago, that *self-alienation* was the key to a successful society. Filling the young mind with the thoughts of others and surrounding it with ugliness — that was the passport to self-alienation. Who can say that he was wrong?

II

I want to give you a yardstick, a gold standard, by which to measure good schooling. The Shelter Institute in Bath, Maine will teach you how to build a three thousand-square-foot, multi-level Cape Cod home in three weeks' time, whatever your age. If you stay another week, it will show you how to make your own posts and beams; you'll actually cut them out and set them up. You'll learn wiring, plumbing, insulation, the works. Twenty thousand people have learned how to build a house there for about the cost of one month's tuition in public school. (Call Patsy Hennon at 207/442-7938, and she'll

get you started on building your own home.) For just about the same money you can walk down the street in Bath to the Apprentice Shop at the Maine Maritime Museum and sign on for a one-year course (no vacations, forty hours a week) in traditional wooden boat building. The whole tuition is eight hundred dollars, but there's a catch: they won't accept you as a student until you volunteer for two weeks, so they can get to know you and you can judge what it is you're getting into. Now you've invested thirteen months and fifteen hundred dollars and you have a house and a boat. What else would you like to know? How to grow food, make clothes, repair a car, build furniture, sing? Those of you with a historical imagination will recognize Thomas Jefferson's prayer for schooling — that it would teach useful knowledge. Some places do: the best schooling in the United States today is coming out of museums, libraries, and private institutes. If anyone wants to school your kids, hold them to the standard of the Shelter Institute and you'll do fine.

As long as we're questioning public schooling, we should question whether there really is an abstraction called "the public" at all, except in the ominous calculations of social engineers. As a boy from the banks of the Monongahela River in western Pennsylvania, I find the term insulting, a cartoon of social reality. If an institution that robs people of their right to self-determination can call itself "public"; if being "public" means it can turn families into agents of the state, making parents spy on and harass their sons and daughters because a schoolteacher tells them to; if the state can steal your home because you can't pay its "public" school taxes, and state courts can break up your family if you refuse to allow the state to tell your children what to think — then the word *public* is a label for garbage and for people who allow themselves to be treated like slaves.

A few weeks is all that the Shelter Institute asks for to give you a beautiful Cape Cod home; a few months is all Maine Maritime asks for to teach you boat-building and rope-making, lobstering and sail-making, fishing and naval architecture. We have too much schooling, not too little. Hong Kong, with its short school year, whips Japan in every scientific or mathematical competition. Israel, with its long school year, can't keep up with Flemish Belgium, which has the shortest school year in the world.

Somebody's been lying to you. Sweden, a rich, healthy, and beautiful country, with a spectacular reputation for quality in everything, won't *allow* children to enter school before they're seven years old. The total length of Swedish schooling is nine years, not twelve, after which the average Swede runs circles around the over-schooled American. Why don't you know these things? To whose advantage is it that you don't?

When students enroll in a Swedish school, the authorities ask three questions: (1) Why do you want to

go to this school? (2) What do you want to gain from the experience? (3) What are you interested in?

And they listen to the answers.

Can you build a house or a boat? Can you grow food, make clothing, dig a well, sing a song (your own song, that is), make your own children happy, weave a whole life from the everyday world around you? No, you say, you can't? Then listen to me — you have no business with my kid.

In my own life, with my own children, I'm sorry I lacked the courage to say what Hester Prynne, the wearer of the scarlet letter, said to the Puritan elders when they tried to take away her daughter. Alone and friendless, dirt poor, ringed about by enemies, she said, "*Over my dead body.*" A few weeks ago a young woman called me from Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania to tell me the state had just insisted she stop home-schooling her little girl, Chrissie. The state was going to force her to send Chrissie to school. She said she was going to fight, first with the law, although she didn't know where the money would come from, and then by any means she had. If I had to bet on this young, single mother or the State of Pennsylvania to win, I'd bet on the lady because what I was really hearing her say was, "*Over my dead body.*" I wish I'd been able to say that when the state came to take my own children. I didn't. But if I'm born again I promise you that's what I will say.

A few days ago I got a call from a newspaper that wanted some advice for parents about how to launch their children into school. All the reporter wanted was a sound byte from a former New York State Teacher of the Year. What I said was this:

Don't cooperate with your children's school unless the school has come to you in person to work out a meeting of the minds — on your turf, not theirs. Only a desperado would blindly trust his children to a collection of untested strangers and hope for the best. Parents and school personnel are just plain natural adversaries. One group is trying to make a living; the other is trying to make a work of art called a family. If you allow yourself to be co-opted by flattery, seduced with worthless payoffs such as special classes or programs, intimidated by Alice in Wonderland titles and degrees, you will become the enemy within, the extension of state schooling into your own home. Shame on you if you allow that. Your job is to educate, the schoolteacher's is to school; you work for love, the teacher for money. The interests are radically different, one an individual thing, the other a collective. You can make your own son or daughter one of a kind if you have the time and will to do so; school can only make them part of a hive, a herd, or an anthill.

III

How did I survive for nearly thirty years in a system for which I feel such disgust and loathing? I want to make a confession in the hope it will suggest strategy to other teachers: I did it by becoming an active saboteur, in small ways and large. What I did resolutely was to teach kids what I'm saying here — that schooling is bad business unless it teaches you how to build a boat or a house; that giving strangers intimate information about yourself is certainly to their advantage, but seldom to your own.

On a daily basis I consciously practiced sabotage, breaking laws regularly, forcing the fixed times and spaces of schooling to become elastic, falsifying records so the rigid curricula of those places could be what individual children needed. I threw sand in the gears by encouraging new teachers to think dialectically so that they wouldn't fit into the pyramid of administration. I exploited the weakness of the school's punitive mechanism, *which depends on fear to be effective*, by challenging it in visible ways, showing I did not fear it, setting administrators against each other to prevent the juggernaut from crushing me. When that didn't work I recruited community forces to challenge the school — businessmen, politicians, parents, and journalists — so I would be given a wide berth. Once, under heavy assault, I asked my wife to run for school board. She got elected, fired the superintendent, and then punished his cronies in a host of imaginative ways.

But what I am most proud of is this: *I undermined the confidence of the young in the school institution and replaced it with confidence in their own minds and hearts.* I thumbed my nose at William Torrey Harris and gave to my children (although I was well into manhood before I shook off the effects of my own schooling) what had been given to me by the green river Monongahela and the steel city of Pittsburgh: love of family, friends, culture, and neighborhood, and a cup overflowing with self-respect. I taught my kids how to cheat destiny so successfully that they created a record of astonishing success that deserves a book someday. Some of my kids left school to go up the Amazon and live with Indian tribes to study on their own the effects of government dam-building on traditional family life; some went to Nicaragua and joined combat teams to study the amazing hold of poetry on the lives of common people in that land; some made award-winning movies; some became comedians; some succeeded at love, some failed. All learned to argue with Fate in the form of social engineering.

IV

I hope you saw the news story a while back about a national milk price-rigging scheme in schools from Florida to Utah. Fifty-six arrests have already been made in a caper that's existed most of this century. Schools pay more for milk than any other bulk buyer. Does that

surprise you? Ask your own school administrator what unit price he pays for school milk and he'll look at you like your marbles are gone. How should he know, why should he care? An assistant principal once said to me, "It's not your money. What are you getting excited about?"

What if I told you that he was the second best school administrator I met in thirty years? He was. That's the standard we've established. The waste in schools is staggering. People are hired and titles created for jobs nobody needs. There's waste in services contracted for; waste in supplies like books and milk; stupendous waste in precious time spent moving herds of children back and forth through corridors at the sound of a horn. In my experience, poor schools waste much more than rich schools, and rich schools waste more than you could believe.

The only public aspect of these places is that they function as a jobs project, although large numbers of these jobs are set aside as political patronage. Public schools can't understand how the average private school can make profit on a per-seat cost less than half the "free" public charge; they can't understand how the average religious school makes do on even less. Home-schooling is the biggest puzzle of all. A principal once said to me, "Those people must be sick to spend so much time with children and not get paid for it!"

Consider the fantasy of teacher certification. Teachers are licensed and paid as though they are specialists, but they rarely are. For example, a science teacher is almost never actually a scientist — a man or woman who thinks about the secrets of nature as a private passion and pursues this interest on personal time. How many science classes in this country actually make any serious attempt to discover anything or to add to human knowledge? They are orderly ways of killing time, nothing more.

Kids are set to memorizing science vocabulary, repeating well-worn procedures certain to work, chanting formulas exactly as they have been indoctrinated to chant commercials from TV. The science teacher is a publicist for political truths set down in state-approved science textbooks.

Anyone who thinks school science is the inevitable precursor of real science is very innocent, indeed; of a piece, I think, with those poor, intelligent souls who, aware that television destroys the power to think by providing pre-seen sights, pre-thought thoughts, and unwholesome fantasies, still believe somehow that PBS television must be an exception to the rule.

If you would like to know how scientists are really made, pick up a wonderful book called *Discovering*, published in 1989 by Harvard University Press. In it you'll learn from a prominent scientist himself that not one major scientific discovery of this century, including

exotica like superconductivity, came from an academic laboratory, or a corporate or government laboratory, or a school laboratory. You could have guessed the last, but I surprised you with the others, didn't I? All came from garages, attics, and basements; all were managed with cheap, simple equipment and eccentric, personalized procedures of investigation. School is a perfect place to turn science into a religion, but it's the wrong place to learn science, for sure.

The specialists in English, math, social studies, and the rest of the rainbow of progressive subjects are only marginally more competent, if at all. If three million teachers were actually the specialists their licenses claim, they would be a major voice in national life and policy-

making; if we are honest, we must wonder how it is possible for an army so large to be so silent, of such little consequence, in spite of the new hokum being retailed about "school-based management."

Don't misunderstand me: teachers are frequently good people, intelligent people, talented people who work very hard. But regardless of how bright they are, how gracefully they

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"schoolteach," or how well they control children's behavior (which is, after all, what they are hired to do; if they can't do that, they are fired, but if they can, little else really matters), the net result of their efforts and our expense is surely very little or even nothing; indeed, often it leaves children worse off in terms of mental development and character formation than they were before being "taught." Schools that seem to be successful almost always are made to appear so by selective enrollment of self-motivated children.

V
The best way into the strange world of compulsory schooling is through books. I always knew real books and schoolbooks were different, but I didn't become conscious of the particulars until I got weary one day of New York City's brainless English curriculum and decided to teach *Moby Dick* to mainstream eighth-grade English classes. I discovered that the White Whale is too big for the forty-five-minute bell breaks of a junior high school. I couldn't make it "fit." But the editors of the school edition of *Moby Dick* had provided a package of prefabricated questions and nearly a hundred interpretations of their own. Every chapter began and

ended with a barrage of these interventions. I came to see that the school edition wasn't a real book at all but a disguised indoctrination. The book had been rendered teacher-proof and student-proof.

This jigsaw fragmentation, designed to make the job site safe from its employees, is usually credited to Frederick Taylor's work of sinister genius, *Scientific Management*, written at the turn of this century. But that is wrong. The system was really devised before the American Revolution, in eighteenth-century Prussia, by Frederick the Great, and honed to perfection in early nineteenth-century Prussia after its humiliating defeat by Napoleon in 1806. A new system of schooling was the instrument out of which Prussian vengeance was shaped, a system that reduced human beings during their malleable years to reliable machine parts, human machinery dependent upon the state for its mission and purpose. When Blucher's Death's Head Hussars destroyed Napoleon at Waterloo, the value of Prussian schooling was confirmed.

By 1819, Prussian philosophy had given the world its first laboratory of compulsory schooling. That same year Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, the story of a German intellectual who fabricated a monster out of the parts of dead bodies: compulsory schooling was the monster she had in mind, emblemized in the lurching destruction caused by a homeless, synthetic creature seeking its maker, a creature with the infinite inner pain that ambiguous family brings.

In the nineteenth century, ties between Prussia and the United States were exceedingly close, a fact unknown these days because it became embarrassing to us during the World Wars and so was removed from history books. American scholarship during the nineteenth century was almost exclusively German at its highest levels, another fact conveniently absent from popular history. From 1814 to 1900, more than fifty thousand young men from prominent American families made the pilgrimage to Prussia and other parts of Germany to study under its new system of higher education based on research instead of "teaching." Ten thousand brought back Ph.D.'s to a then-uncredentialed United States, preempting most of the available intellectual and technical work.

Prussian education was the national obsession among American political leaders, industrialists, clergy, and university people. In 1845, the Prussian emperor was even asked to adjudicate the boundary between Canada and the United States! Virtually every founding father of American compulsory schooling went to Prussia to study its clockwork schoolrooms firsthand. Horace Mann's *Seventh Report To The Boston School Committee of 1844* was substantially devoted to glowing praise of Prussian accomplishments and how they should become our own. Victor Cousin's book on Prussian schooling was the talk

of our country about the same time. When, only a quarter-century later, Prussia crushed France in a brief war and performed the miracle of unifying Germany, it seemed clear that the way to unify our immigrant classes — which we so desperately sought to do — was through Prussian schooling.

By 1905, Prussian-trained Americans, or Americans like John Dewey who apprenticed at Prussian-trained hands, were in command of every one of our new institutions of scientific teacher training: Columbia Teacher's College, the University of Chicago, Johns Hopkins, the University of Wisconsin, Stanford. The domination of Prussian vision, and the general domination of German philosophy and pedagogy, was a fait accompli among the leadership of American schooling.

You should care about this for the compelling reason that German practices were used here to justify removal of intellectual material from the curriculum; it may explain why your own children cannot think. That was the Prussian way — to train only a leadership cadre to think.

Of all the men whose vision excited the architects of the new Prussianized American school machine, the most exciting were a German philosopher named Hegel and a German doctor named Wilhelm Wundt. In Wundt's laboratory the techniques of psychophysics (what today we might call "experimental psychology") were refined. Thanks to his work, it took only a little imagination to see an awesome new world emerging — for Wundt had demonstrated convincingly to his American students that people were only complex machines!

Man a machine? The implications were exhilarating, promising liberation from the ancient shackles of tradition, culture, morality, and religion. *Adjustment* became the watchword of schools and social welfare offices. G. Stanley Hall, one of Wundt's personal protégés (who as a professor at Johns Hopkins had inoculated his star pupil, John Dewey, with the German virus), now joined with Thorndike, his German-trained colleague at Columbia Teacher's College, to beat the drum for national standardized testing. Hall shrewdly sponsored and promoted an American tour for the Austrian doctor Sigmund Freud so that Freud might popularize his theory that parents and family were the cause of virtually all *maladjustment* — all the *more* reason to remove their little machines to the safety of schools.

In the minds of disciples of German educational thought, scientific education was primarily a way of forcing people to fit. With such a "technical" goal in mind, the future course of American schooling was determined, and with massive financial support from the foundations — especially those of the Rockefeller and Carnegie families — new scientific colleges to shape teachers were established. In Prussia these were aptly called "teacher seminaries," but here secular religionists

were more discreet: a priesthood of trained professionals would guard the new school-church and write its canonical text into state law. Thus the Torah of twentieth-century compulsory schooling was in its Ark by 1895, one third of the way through the reign of William Torrey Harris as U.S. Commissioner of Education.

VI

Teacher training in Prussia was founded on three premises, which the United States subsequently borrowed. The first of these is that *the state is sovereign, the only true parent of children*. Its corollary is that *biological parents are the enemies of their offspring*. When Germany's Froebel invented Kindergarten, it was not a garden for children he had in mind but a garden of children, in which state-appointed teachers were the gardeners of the children. Kindergarten is meant to *protect* children from their own mothers.

The second premise of Prussian schooling is that *intellectual training is not the purpose of state schooling — obedience and subordination are*. In fact, intellectual training will invariably *subvert* obedience unless it is rigidly controlled and doled out as a reward for obedience. If the will could be broken all else would follow. Keep in mind that will-breaking was the central logic of child-rearing among our own Puritan colonists, and you will see the natural affinity that exists between Prussian seeds and Puritan soil — from which agriculture our compulsory schooling law springs. The best-known device to break the will of the young, practiced for centuries among English and German upper classes, was the separation of parent and child at an early age. Here now was an institution backed by the police power of the state to guarantee that separation. But it was not enough to *compel* obedience by intimidation. *The child must be brought to love its synthetic parent*. When George Orwell's protagonist in 1984 realizes that he loves Big Brother after betraying his lover to the state, we have a dramatic embodiment of the sexual destination of Prussian-type schooling; it creates a willingness to sell out your own family, friends, culture, and religion for your new lover, the state. Twelve years of arbitrary punishment and reward in the confinement of a classroom is ample time to condition any child to believe that he who wields red-pen-power is the true parent, and they who control the buzzers must be gods.

The third premise of Prussian training is that *the schoolroom and the workplace shall be dumbed down into simplified fragments that anyone, however dull, can memorize and operate*. This solves the historical dilemma of leadership: a disobedient work force could be replaced quickly, without damage to production, if the workers required only habit, not mind, to function properly. This strategy paid off recently during the national strike of air-traffic controllers, when the entire force of these

supposed "experts" was replaced overnight by management personnel and hastily trained fill-ins. There was no increase in accidents across the system! If anyone can do any particular job there's no reason to pay them very much except to guarantee employee loyalty and dependency — a form of love which bad parents often extort from their young in the same way.

In the training ground of the classroom, everything is reduced to bits under close management control. This allows progress to be quantified into precise rankings to track students throughout their careers — the great irony being that it's not intellectual growth that grades and reports really measure, but obedience to authority. That's why regular disclosures about the lack of correlation between standardized test scores and performance do not end the use of these surveillance mechanisms. What they

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actually measure is the tractability of the student, and this they do quite accurately. Is it of value to know who is docile and who may not be? You tell me.

Finally, if workers or students have little or no idea how their own part fits into the whole, if they are unable to make decisions, grow food, build a home or boat, or even entertain

themselves, then political and economic stability will reign because only a carefully screened and seasoned leadership will know how things work. Uninitiated citizens will not even know what questions should be asked, let alone where the answers might be found. This is sophisticated pedagogy indeed, if far from what mother and father expect when they send Junior to school. This is what the religious Right is talking about when it claims that schooling is a secular religion. If you can think independently of pre-thought thoughts and received wisdom, you must certainly arrive at the same conclusion, whatever your private theology. Schooling is our official state religion; in no way is it a neutral vehicle for learning.

The sheer craziness of what we do to our children should have been sufficient cause to stop it once the lunacy was manifest in increased social pathology, but a crucial development forestalled corrective action: schooling became the biggest business of all. Suddenly

there were jobs, titles, careers, prestige, and contracts to protect. As a country we've never had the luxury of a political or a religious or a cultural consensus. As a synthetic state, we've had only economic consensus: unity is achieved by making everyone want to get rich, or making them envy those who are.

Once a splendid economic machine like schooling was rolling, only a madman would try to stop it or to climb off its golden ascent. True, its jobs didn't seem to pay much (although its contractors *did* and *do* make fortunes), but upon closer inspection they paid more than most. And the security for the obedient was matchless because the institution provided the best insurance that a disturbing social mobility (characteristic of a frontier society) could finally be checked. Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, William Harris, Edward Thorndike, William James, John Dewey, Stanley Hall, Charles Judd, Ellwood Cubberly, James Russell — all the great schoolmen of American history — made endless promises to industrialists and old-line American families of prominence that if the new Prussian scheme were given support, prospects of a revolution here would vanish. (What a great irony that in a revolutionary nation the most effective motivator of leadership was the guarantee that another one could be prevented!)

Schools would be the insurance policy for a new industrial order which, as an unfortunate byproduct of its operations, would destroy the American family, the small farmer, the landscape, the air, the water, the religious base of community life, the time-honored covenant that Americans could rise and fall by their own efforts. This industrial order would destroy democracy itself, and the promise held out to common men and women that if they were ever backed into a corner by their leaders, they might change things overnight at the ballot box.

I hope you can see now that this Prussian theory of workplaces and schools isn't just some historical oddity, but is necessary to explain customary textbook structure and classroom procedures, which fly in the face of how people actually learn. It explains the inordinate interest the foundations of Rockefeller and Carnegie took in shaping early compulsory schooling around a standardized factory model, and it sheds light on many mysterious aspects of modern American culture: for instance, why, in a democracy, can't citizens be *automatically* registered at birth to vote, once and for all?

Compulsory schooling has been, from the beginning, a scheme of indoctrination into the new concept of mass man, an important part of which was the creation of a proletariat. According to Auguste Comte (surely the godfather of scientific schooling), you could create a useful proletariat class by breaking connections between children and their families, their communities, their God, and themselves. Remember William Harris's belief that self-alienation was the key to successful schooling? Of course it is. These connections have to be broken to

create a dependable citizenry because, if left alive, the loyalties they foster are unpredictable and unmanageable. People who maintain such relationships often say, "Over my dead body." How can states operate that way?

Think of government schooling as a vast behavior clinic designed to create a harmless proletariat, the most important part of which is a *professional* proletariat of lawyers, doctors, engineers, managers, government people, and schoolteachers. This professional proletariat, more homeless than the poor and the sub-poor, is held hostage by its addiction to luxury and security, and by its fear that the licensing monopoly might be changed by any change in governance. The main service it renders — advice — is contaminated by self-interest. We are all dying from it, the professional proletariat faster than anyone. It is *their* children who commit literal suicide with such regularity, not the children of the poor.

VII

Printing questions at the end of chapters is a deliberate way of dumbing down a text to make it teacher-proof. We've done it so long that nobody examines the premises under the practice or sees the permanent reduction in mental sovereignty it causes. Just as science teachers were never supposed to be actual scientists, literature teachers weren't supposed to be original thinkers who brought original questions to the text.

In 1926, Bertrand Russell said casually that the United States was the first nation in human history to deliberately deny its children the tools of critical thinking; actually Prussia was first, we were second. The school edition of *Moby Dick* asked all the right questions, so I had to throw it away. Real books don't do that. They let readers actively participate with their own questions. Books that show you the best questions to ask aren't just stupid, they hurt the intellect under the guise of helping it, just as standardized tests do.

Well-schooled people, like schoolbooks, are very much alike. Propagandists have known for a century that school-educated people are easier to lead than ignorant people — as Dietrich Bonhoeffer confirmed in his studies of Nazism.

It's very useful for some people that our form of schooling tells children what to think about, how to think about it, and when to think about it. It's very useful to some groups that children are trained to be dependent on experts, to react to titles instead of judging the real men and women who hide behind the titles. It isn't very healthy for families and neighborhoods, cultures and religions. But then school was never about those things anyway: that's why we don't have them around anymore. You can thank government schooling for that.

VIII

I think it would be fair to say that the overwhelming majority of people who make schools work today are

unaware why they fail to give us successful human beings, no matter how much money is spent or how much good will is expended on reform efforts. This explains the inevitable temptation to find villains and to cast blame — on bad teaching, bad parents, bad children, or penurious taxpayers.

The thought that school may be a brilliantly conceived social engine that works *exactly* as it was designed to work and produces *exactly* the human products it was designed to produce establishes a different relation to the usual demonologies. Seeing school as a triumph of human ingenuity, as a glorious success, forces us to consider whether we *want* this kind of success, and if not, to envision something of value in its place. And it forces us to challenge whether there is a “we,” a national consensus sufficient to justify looking for *one* right way rather than dozens or even hundreds of right ways. I don’t think there is.

IX

Museums and institutes of useful knowledge travel a different road than schools. Consider the difference between librarians and schoolteachers. Librarians are custodians of real books and real readers; schoolteachers are custodians of schoolbooks and indentured readers. Somewhere in the difference is the Rosetta Stone that reveals how education is one thing, schooling another.

Begin with the setting and social arrangement of a library. The ones I’ve visited all over the country invariably are comfortable and quiet, places where you can read rather than just pretend to read. How important this silence is. Schools are never silent.

People of all ages work side by side in libraries, not just a pack of age-segregated kids. For some reason, libraries do not segregate by age nor do they presume to segregate readers by questionable tests of reading ability. Just as the people who decoded the secrets of farming or of the forests and oceans were not segregated by age or test scores, the library seems to have intuited that common human judgment is adequate to most learning decisions.

The librarian doesn’t tell me what to read, doesn’t tell me the sequence of reading I have to follow, doesn’t grade my reading. Librarians act as if they trust their customers. The librarian lets me ask my own questions and helps me when I need help, not when the library decides I need it. If I feel like reading in the same place all day long, that seems to be OK with the library. It doesn’t tell me to stop reading at regular intervals by ringing a bell in my ear. The library keeps its nose out of my home, too. It doesn’t send letters to my mother reporting on my library behavior; it doesn’t make recommendations or issue orders on how I should use my time spent outside of the library.

The library doesn’t have a tracking system. Everyone is mixed together there, and no private files exist

detailing my past victories and defeats as a patron. If the books I want are available, I get them by requesting them — even if that deprives some more gifted reader, who comes a minute later. The library doesn’t presume to determine which of us is more qualified to read that book; it doesn’t play favorites. It is a very class-blind, talent-blind place, appropriately reflecting our historic political ideals in a way that puts schools to shame.

The public library isn’t into public humiliation the way schools seem to be. It never posts ranked lists of good and bad readers for all to see. Presumably it considers good reading its own reward, not requiring

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additional accolades, and it has resisted the temptation to hold up good reading as a moral goad to bad readers. One of the strangest differences between libraries and schools, in New York City at least, is that you almost never see a kid behaving badly in a library or waving a gun there — even though bad kids have exactly the same access to libraries as good kids do. Bad kids seem to respect libraries, a curious phenomenon which

may well be an unconscious response to the automatic respect libraries bestow blindly on everyone. Even people who don’t like to read like libraries from time to time; in fact, they are such generally wonderful places I wonder why we haven’t made them compulsory — and all alike, of course, too.

Here’s another angle to consider: the library never makes predictions about my general future based on my past reading habits, nor does it hint that my days will be happier if I read Shakespeare rather than Barbara Cartland. The library tolerates eccentric reading habits because it realizes that free men and women are often very eccentric.

And finally, the library has real books, not schoolbooks. Its volumes are not written by collective pens or picked by politically correct screening committees. Real books conform only to the private curriculum of each writer, not to the invisible curriculum of some German collective agenda. The one exception to this is children’s books — but no sensible child ever reads those things, so the damage from them is minimal.

Real books are deeply subversive of collectivization. They are the best known way to escape herd behavior, because they are vehicles transporting the reader into deep caverns of absolute solitude where nobody else can visit. No two people ever read the same great book. Real books disgust the totalitarian mind because they generate uncontrollable mental growth — and it cannot be monitored!

Television has entered the classroom because it is a collective mechanism and, as such, much superior to textbooks; similarly, slides, audio tapes, group games, and so on meet the need to collectivize, which is a central purpose of mass schooling. This is the famous “socialization” that schools do so well. Schoolbooks, on the other hand, are paper tools that reinforce school routines of close-order drill, public mythology, endless surveillance, global ranking, and constant intimidation.

That's what the questions at the end of chapters are designed to do, to bring you back to a reality in which you are *subordinate*. Nobody really expects you to *answer* those questions, not even the teacher; they work their harm solely by being there. That is their genius. Schoolbooks are a crowd-control device. Only the very innocent and well-schooled see any difference between good ones and bad ones; both kinds do the same work. In that respect they are much like television programming, the function of which, as a plug-in narcotic, is infinitely more powerful than any trivial differences between good programs and bad.

Real books educate, schoolbooks school, and thus libraries and library policies are a major clue to the reform of American schooling. When you take the free will and solitude out of education it becomes schooling. You can't have it both ways. ■