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## The Educational Mission

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The four contributions before us reflect the current stance toward educational institutions. All four are broadly rebellious: they view the contemporary system of education as highly counterproductive, as not only failing to serve its purposes but as causing severe damage. These four authors, given the choice of pushing a button to eliminate the existing system of education, would do so—though with varying degrees of reluctance, or, I should say, dispatch.

On the face of it, all four authors, as well as many other educationalist critics, seem seriously engaged in transformation. It is the main point of my commentary, however, that while the basic charges the rebellion makes against the existing system are valid (although the criticism is often too sweeping and exaggerated), the business of transformation is yet to be given serious attention. The critics, I would argue, are typically ultraoptimistic about human nature and excessively Utopian about the possibilities of casting new societal patterns. If the critical fire is to generate more guiding light for the forthcoming transformation of our educational system and society, its bearers must become more realistic, empirical, and in this sense, more relevant.

The particular way in which an author, critic, or (by implication) an institution sees human nature is the corner stone on which the intellectual tower rests. The present school system, or, more precisely, its worst parts, tends to assume (not necessarily consciously but as suggested by its institutional structure) that the child is a wild beast who must be civilized. Hence a large segment of school life is disciplinary, aimed at keeping the lid on and training the child to sit still, listen, obey, and absorb information, skills, and values.

The critics see a quite different child. They believe that the child, by nature, is eager to learn. If his nature is allowed to unfold, free from the distorting effects of the school, he will take to education like a sunflower to sunshine. Illich thus argues that "we can depend on self-motivated learning instead of employing teachers to bribe or compel the student to find time and the will to learn." The child may need help to be sufficiently motivated, help a motivated and well-guided teacher may provide without bribe or force but by use of positive models and symbolic rewards.

It is the exceedingly optimistic assumption that the child is self-propelling, which allows the rebellion to pass as transformation—in the guise of reductionism. This deserves some elaboration. The main suggestion endorsed by all four authors, albeit in varying degrees, is that the amount and scope of schooling must be drastically reduced in order to "free" education from its institutional cage. By and large, school is not to be replaced by anything. Education is to occur chiefly by itself, by the child's participation in *on-going* activities and his selection of which set of resources he will apply to himself. This position has two attributes: first, it suggests that by merely doing away with institutions (a position taken elsewhere vis-à-vis sexual taboos and authority), we not only eliminate the existing system but also provide a viable foundation for the new world. Second, it frees the analyst from having to think out what new system will have to be erected—the child knows best where he should be and what he needs. Practically all the specific suggestions made here are based on this double assumption: the child wishes to learn and he needs less, not more, institutional support. Goodman's notion of incidental learning, Bereiter's and Illich's notion of providing the child with educational resources, and the shared view of the teacher as a child's "source person," all assume that the child is able *and* motivated to learn and that his choices are the educated and educating ones.

The evidence in favor of those cheerful assumptions is slim and very difficult to evaluate. A review of the data and the methodological difficulties involved is a task we cannot undertake here.\* However, two points can be made, drawing not on empirical data but on the logic of the arguments involved. First, educational institutions are clearly part of the societal web. The child, even if he "naturally" would have been education-eager, obviously does not enter school unaffected by his family, his neighborhood, the mass media, etc. Obviously he was exposed to these influences *before* he was of school age, and they also continue to affect him while he is at school. By and large, these forces are similar to the *old* school system—they tend to make the child passive, dependent, alienated.

\*See Amitai Etzioni, *The Active Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1968; paperback edition, 1971), chap. 21.

The question hence must be raised: What child do the optimists talk about—the postrevolutionary child, born to a liberated home and community in a society in which all means of production are collectivized, the media are educational, etc.? Or is he the one who is actually entering our schools now? Can he be truly freed simply by releasing him from school? Must we not try to help children—at least until the revolution comes—to overcome the distortions they bring to school from their nonliberated backgrounds? And are not these distortions deep and severe enough to require a teacher and a school which can motivate, plan, and guide, rather than relying on the child of a distorted society to supervise his own rehabilitation? Are not children like those workers who have not yet acquired class awareness—in need of resourceful, active, effective leadership and a master educational plan? They will never awake from their TV-induced, parent-supported slumber if they follow Goodman's prescription:

The goal of elementary education should be a very modest one: it is for a small child, under his own steam, not on a leash, to be able to poke interestedly into whatever goes on, and to be able, by observation, questions, and practical imitation, to get something out of it on his own terms.

One answer, of which Illich is a particularly keen proponent, is that education is the realm in which the revolution would be generated. By redoing the child, we set into motion a major force which could redo society. But I find it difficult to see how one can assume that the forces which sustain the existing economic and political stratification and the structures of mass media will allow the educational resources to be used against them. And I am not aware of any evidence that education can be used as a lever to lift the world. I am inclined to hold that education can change along with other institutions, both helping to change them and being helped to change by their change. But education cannot be the prime transformer.

And, if we are to educate children, let us not kid them and ourselves about the scope, depth, and extent of the project involved. Transforming a society is not an ego trip or a love-in. It is not merely a question of changing one's lifestyle but of unlocking millions caught in the psychic, economic, and political tangle of the existing society. Whoever wishes to participate in this enterprise will have to have much of the self-discipline, the commitment to society above self and immediate peers, and the long-run perspective so unpopular among the education rebels.

Thus, for the time being, to eradicate educational institutions is to turn children over to other nonfree institutions, for example, from the authoritarian family to the exploitative labor market. To

provide children with educational resources and teachers who respond rather than guide is to assume that children are already liberated, while in fact they must yet be set free. And to assume that there will be an easy transformation of the modern society to a good society is to underestimate greatly the tenacity of modernity and hence the magnitude of the educational and revolutionary mission.