

ENTARY

SCHOOLS

THE SUMMERHILL GAMBLE: THOUGHTS ON ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

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It is no longer a secret that there is something drastically wrong with the way we live: even the most conservative critic is willing to admit that the mass culture of Middle America is breaking down. To this crisis (and to the generally arid quality of American life) the movement for alternative education is, to date, the most promising response.

Unlike the Socialist movement, which never really struck roots in American life, the alternative school movement began as a felt need among parents and teachers. Not only has it produced a devastating critique of conventional wisdom about public school education but it has succeeded in firing the imagination of the young as nothing else has. As a result we have a rapidly growing literature on alternative school theory as well as an actual historical record of accomplishment to which we can turn if we wish to evaluate its promise for the future.

At the core of the alternative school philosophy is a recoil from the manipulateness and impersonality of bourgeois life and the re-discovery of the child as the psychological subject of the educational process. The child is experienced in his personhood: not as the object of behavioral training but as the feeling, thinking, weighing, judging, and freely co-operating subject of a process which at all points involves him as a moral being.

Everything of value in the literature of alternative schools flows from this simple insight which forms the secret center from which the argument moves. Let me invite your attention to the moral significance of the following lines which introduce John Holt's well known book:

I believe, and try to show here, that our minds work best when we try to use them in a certain way, and that young children tend to learn better than grownups (and better than they themselves will when they are older) because they use their minds in a special way. In short, children have a style of learning that fits their condition, and which they use naturally and well until we train them out of it. We like to say that we send children to school to teach them to think. What we do, all too often, is to teach them to think badly, to give up a natural and powerful way of thinking in favor of a method which does not work well for them and that we rarely use ourselves.

The insistence on the authentic, on never manipulating the child through fear or favor, or violating his moral sovereignty, makes "free school" literature speak directly

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to the master problem of American life. By comparison, the conventional wisdom of the scholarly Establishment in hundreds of Departments of Education is almost pathetically irrelevant. As the beginnings of a new way of life, a new "pattern of culture" (to borrow Alexander Meiklejohn's apt phrase) the case for alternative education is irrefutable. But this is only the first step: if the friends of alternative education are determined to make something more than an ephemeral contribution it is essential that they recognize certain (in my opinion, inevitable) confusions of which the following are the most crucial:

1) Alternative education is bedeviled by the confusion of "learning" with "education:" the two terms are clearly not synonymous: "learning" is a broader, more general concept than "education." Learning is a part of life, while education is the culture of the mind. Education includes learning but is not co-extensive with it: when Tarzan learned to swim and Gina Lollobrigida to act (like Gina Lollobrigida) this did not in itself make them educated in any recognizable sense — as, say, Stravinsky.

2) For want of any proper theory of *authority* the apologists of alternative education can make no sense of the crucial distinction between authoritarianism and authoritative guidance. Herbert Kohl's vigorous polemic *The Open Classroom* is destroyed by this elementary confusion. Kohl would like to have children be our "allies" rather than our "enemies." The thought does him credit — but, of course, neither concept is remotely applicable. This way lies the road to chaos: If it is the "will of the class," a teacher who wishes to discuss one thing, say, O. Henry, will "drop the whole thing and go on to something else." To see the utter absurdity of such reasoning we have only to picture a class taught by a real master (Casals, Wittgenstein, etc.) Kohl's argument depends for its plausibility on the figure of the average overworked and under-trained public school teacher: substitute a real expert who knows his work and how to teach and the whole elaborate structure of "the open classroom" collapses.

3) The real danger of these arguments is their disintegrative effect on the cultural context within which alone education is meaningful. The strain toward anarchism lies just beneath the surface in Holt and Kohl and erupts in the pages of Paul Goodman. All learning presupposes a cultural context and education is, in the first instance, initiation into the culture through the agency of the school and the teacher. Education, says Oakshott, is:

a two-fold process in which we enjoy an initiation into what for want of a better word I will call a 'civilization,' and in doing so discover our own talents and aptitudes in relation to that civilization and begin to cultivate and to use them. Learning to make something of ourselves in no context in particular is an impossibility; and the context appears not only in what is learned but also in the conditions of

direction and restraint that belong to any education.

The attempt to provide a theory of education without the support of a contextual pattern of culture can fairly be called the central paradox of free school theory which runs like a red skein through the entire enterprise.

4) What we have, then, is a rebellion against not only (Bourgeois) Middle America, that would be understandable, but against the entire tradition which has formed us and outside of which we become isolated and meaningless atoms rattling around in a void. This rebellion has already produced some disastrous results: The first is the wholesale vulgarization of education. "Free schools" make a silly distinction between the "creative," which demands no effort, and the "academic," which invokes no enthusiasm. And in the name of this distinction, the silliest "projects" (it would be unkind to list them) which might be appropriate in the home or backyard, are done in the guise of "education." Worse, the anti-elitist prejudice in alternative schools (which is *not*, I like to think, an essential part of free school theory) amounts to an open conspiracy against culture. The jargon of elitism (again understandable as a recoil against bourgeois stratification) beclouds the issue: nature herself seems to have given us a few men of great worth: few great novelists, few great critics, few great mathematicians and scientists, few great philosophers and mystics — and only one Socrates. The crude egalitarianism of the alternative school reproduces the worst levelling strains in American society and conspires with it to destroy the "select minority" (as Ortega like to call it) which leavens any culture. Finally, it is evident on this analysis that alternative "education" is not as yet a genuine, full-bodied *alternative* to Establishment but only its dialectical counterpart: since it lacks a real *philosophy* of education which alone could give it a critical distance from the *status quo*, free school teachers have no higher standard with which to judge a child's desires: thus, the child is seen as "want-regarding" animal: "X" is good because the child *desires* it. This is to reduce the good to the desirable, and by the same token to abdicate our responsibilities as parents and teachers and, at the margin, as citizens. It is also, and this is the most cutting irony, a betrayal of the promise of alternative education.

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