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Schooling
and the
Privatization of Experience

schools under attack

What Hutchins describes as the "great campaign against the public schools" has seemingly left few spoils from which one might mount new and different attacks. For as he put it:

> The schools have been assailed from every conceivable direction, with every conceivable motive. The coalition against them is such to suggest that the one thing on which our people have reached unanimity is the evils of our system of public education. . . . Soft-hearted revolutionaries and hard-headed businessmen join in arguing that the public schools should be abolished. . . . Nobody has a kind word for the public school, the institution that only the other day was looked upon as the foundation of our freedom, the guaranty of our future, the cause of our prosperity and power, the bastion of our security, and the source of our enlightenment.[1]

It even appears that the "great campaign" has reached the stage of overkill for which evidence is found in a number of developments beyond those suggested by Hutchins. The more strident critics, for example, particularly the de-schoolers and "free"-schoolers, are increasingly finding that they are talking only to themselves. In this regard they are experiencing what the so-called "romantic critics" (e.g., Holt, Friedenberg, Goodman, Kozol, and Kohl) of the early and middle 1960's went through. They review each other's books, act as respondents to one another's speeches, and sit together on panels addressing the same kinds of audiences repeatedly. Others are beginning to soften their barbs given their tardy recognition that most of our school problems are extensions of those in society at large. What is so ironic about the "great campaign," however, particularly in its de-schooling and "free"-schooling aspects, is that it serves to perpetuate many of the social ills it presumably seeks to alleviate.

I wish to argue the importance, indeed the crucial necessity of the public school. This will be revealed through an analysis of institutional fragmentation in advanced industrialized society, the privatization of the individual made possible and promoted by this fragmentation, and the potentially pervasive and oppressive social control all this makes likely. I am not at all sure about the precise nature of the role for the public school that can be carved out of the analysis which follows, but I am persuaded the necessity of public schooling comes through. Most important, however, I am convinced that the *idea* of public schooling turns out to be a great idea indeed.[2]

institutional fragmentation

A number of social analysts have commented on the fact that, in our structurally pluralistic society, the various institutional sectors — family, church, school, military, government, business, communicative media, etc. — are growing increasingly independent of, and thus isolated from, each other.[3] A number of developments have been cited as causal forces. Most of them seem to converge in ways which force institutions to narrow their roles and functions. Just as advanced industrialized society demands that individuals develop specialized skills for prescribed roles, so it does with institutions. And just as individuals trained in specialized skills for restricted roles tend to become isolated from and independent of individuals exercising different skills in different roles, so it is with institutional sectors. They appropriate, or have imposed upon them, exclusive roles and functions. They thus become increasingly one-dimensional and cut-off from other institutional sectors. At the same time, and primarily because of inter-institutional independence, individuals are forced to psychologically compartmentalize their relationships to institutions. They must spread out their institutional commitments, in bits and pieces, over an increasingly broad and segmented terrain. Thus it is that various institutional sectors are growing more and more distant from and independent of individuals as they grow isolated from each other.

In pre-industrial or even pre-World War II society, the various institutional sectors were functionally and culturally related, if not interdependent and mutually supportive. This was particularly true at the community level and especially for those institutions which served as primary and secondary acculturing agencies. Moreover, individuals in earlier days belonged to only a relatively few enduring institutions and only a few stable groupings. Those institutions and groups not

only promoted and sustained lasting interpersonal relation-
ships and individual identity, they satisfied a wide variety of
social and individual needs which now require the services of
a multitude of independent, specialized, isolated institutions
and groups. Charles Frankel illustrates this for us by using
the local church as an example.

> Even fifty years ago, the local church in many places was still the
> focus of community. Men met at the church to get the news, to enjoy
> themselves, to deal with common disasters, to receive or dispense
> charity, to be confirmed and married and to bury their dead. When
> they came together to pray, it was as a community which had been
> meeting regularly to deal with common problems. Now, however, the
> local church is one more specialized association with a special busi-
> ness. Men get their news elsewhere, they get their entertainment else-
> where, and when they realize they have a common problem they usual-
> ly form a special association — a Youth Board, for example, or a
> Civic Association — to deal with the problem. As a result, church
> membership has become more formal and occasional, and prayer more
> abstract.[4]

Today, membership in most institutions and groups has
become formal and temporary, while participation has become
much more functional (task oriented) and abstract. Formerly,
individuals saw their membership and participation in insti-
tutions and groups as organic extensions of membership in
community and society. Institutional and group membership
was viewed as socially binding. And individual participation
was concrete, valued, and visibly rewarding. Institutional in-
terdependence and wide ranging need satisfaction performed
by institutions helped to fashion and sustain a world wherein
a pervasive sense of shared destiny and purpose served to bind
random events together in making meaningful lives. The indi-
vidual considered himself fully integrated into a social (if not
universal) order which embraced his physical and spiritual
existence.

It is probably true that to live in a world populated by the
kinds of institutions and group relations described above re-
quired relatively little "internal" independence, little reliance
upon what we might call ego or critical reasoning. This is a
claim, however, that can only be made by an outside observer.
There is in it, nevertheless, an important message for those
who clamor about today's supposedly conforming American
while looking longingly to the simpler past.

Today, however, even though the various institutional sec-
tors may still be somewhat *functionally* related, they are typi-
cally less so. Family, church, and school, for example, do per-
form child-rearing functions, but increasingly they perform

these independently of, and often in isolation from, each other. Also, they often offer a variety of different, sometimes contending, values, customs, mores, morals, and world views. For these reasons, they are becoming less and less culturally interdependent. Thus, increasingly they are failing to promote and achieve the former coherent patterns of meaning and purpose which were enduringly imprinted as cultural and personal identity sources upon those who passed through them. Today, as the institutional sectors grow more disassociated from each other, they require the individual to fragment meaning, identity, and loyalty. He must change meanings and continuously orchestrate a variety of different, sometimes contending, identities and loyalties while moving from one institutional sector or group to another. The person, then, cannot connect properly, enduringly, or rewardingly with institutions or groups. By necessity, then, he commits himself only partially to each and creates meanings relative to each which become like fugitive pieces of an impossible jig-saw puzzle.[5]

Such a fragmentation also occurs *within* institutional sectors. Going to one Roman Catholic church, for example, is no longer like going to another. Furthermore, all of us are finding that our institutional relationships are increasingly grounded in groupings which, more often than not, are functional, task oriented associations, quick to dissolve upon completion of the task.

Increasingly, persons bring little to such groupings other than their physical presence. Consider, that some of the powerful groups or institutions to which most individuals now belong are the mass organizations like unions, trade organizations, political parties, or professional associations. Power, decision-making responsibilities, and other important participatory functions are highly bureaucratized and vested in the hands of a few dominating leaders or in staff roles filled by specially trained personnel. Accordingly, the meaning of individual membership is obscure in its social significance, and participation is generally abstract and formal.[6] No surprise, then, that most of us participate in such organizations merely through the exercise of writing a check for our annual dues. Even this is not necessary for many of us, since payroll deduction procedures often take care of it.

In any case, the point is that the individual's commitment to institutions and groups, and the meanings he derives from them, are necessarily of a partial and superficial nature.[7] Relationships with institutions and groups are necessarily seen as too impersonal to nurture. All this depletes community feel-

ings and common interests. Social ties become tenuous and impermanent. Thus, in what Bennis and Slater call "a temporary society," in a society of transients, in a society where the individual suffers the inconstancy of everything, in a society where institutions have influence upon him only as he passes through them, and only partial influence at that, the individual is forced to give a bit of himself here, a bit there. He must fragment himself as the world he encounters is itself fragmented.

the pursuit of privacy

A social and cultural ambience such as this leaves unfulfilled needs. These, in turn, constitute voids, what Luckmann calls "interstices" — gaps in the lives of individuals which are unstructured for lack of external roots traditionally found through institutional and group affiliation. The individual consequently lacks a comfortable and stable sense of self and of direction. Unable to locate and affirm himself, he looks inward and withdraws more and more into a private world. "Personal identity becomes, essentially, a private phenomenon." It is sought in subjectivistic ways divorced from institutional and group contexts. "This is, perhaps, the most revolutionary trait of modern society."[8]

Without enduring and identity-giving ties to community, kinship networks, and beliefs and values (in short, all those self-affirming attachments which are generated and sustained by inter-institutional and group dependence), individuals absent themselves from the public world. They become increasingly hermetic and self-indulgent as they seek and exercise private consciousness. Accordingly, it is no surprise that a defining characteristic of modern, structurally pluralistic society is that our institutional sectors tend to take on an objective, distant, independent autonomy separated from individuals who are increasingly privatized.[9]

Privatization obviously means, among other things, that individuals are unfettered by institutional and group loyalties. They become "free" to pursue privacy, to do their "own thing." They are "liberated" from the tasks of the world, so to speak, and can and do hold strongly to what are considered non-negotiable, private directions and satisfactions. Consider in this regard the mass of people whom we loosely categorize as middle-class America. Reflect upon how we seek privacy through varied attempts at creating private life styles, through our rush to isolated, inter-personally sterile bedroom suburbs

or high rise sanctuaries where we can tune out the public world. Consider further how we strive for "a private home, a private means of transportation, a private garden, a private laundry, self-service stores, do it yourself skills of every kind."[10] Reflect upon how we Americans feel that "each member [of the family] should have a separate room and even a separate telephone, television, and car, when economically possible."[11]

The dissolution of the powerful hold over individuals **once** exerted by institutions does bestow upon them a buoyant sense of freedom. But it is important to recognize that this is essentially *freedom from* something. It cannot be construed as freedom in some objective, independent sense. For *freedom from* denotes dislocation and, thus, relational freedom or autonomy. As pointed out by Luckmann, then, this felt freedom may very well constitute only an illusory sense of autonomy.[12] It is, after all, a product of institutional segmentation put together, so to speak, "from the leftovers of a segmented social structure."[13]

In this light it comes as no surprise that much of today's expression of "rebellion" *from* structurally pluralistic society emerges out of, and reveals an emphasis upon, the subjective dimension of man's being. Consider in this regard not only the already mentioned examples of ways in which privacy is sought, but the so-called counter-culture with its emphasis upon the non-intellectual, subjective ways of knowing and dealing with the world, attempts at creating new modes of marital and familial arrangements, and the like. No surprise, either, that ours is a time witnessing the flourishing of astrology, Tarot cards, the Mystic Arts Book Society, the Children of God, group marriages, and perhaps more telling, all those cosmeticized advertisements promoting products offering ingenious ways of pursuing privacy.

In most cases these attempts at privacy are expressions of a yearning to be away from everything. In this sense, they can be seen as attempts at nihilistic anonymity revealing anarchy at its most chic. However, they are merely placebos for the void. They offer only existential cul-de-sacs ending on points of pale resolution or dewy denouement. They are of the category suggested by Marcuse when he asked: "Why not try God, Zen, existentialism, and beat ways of life, etc. . . . ? Such modes of protest and transcendence are no longer contradictory to the status quo and no longer negative. They are rather the ceremonial part of practical behaviorism, its harmless negation and are quickly digested by the status quo as part of its healthy diet."[14] In short, they are expressions of

protest, rebellion, and transcendence, but they are the sort that do not change that from which one is rebelling; and they seldom lead to transcendence. For as we seek more and more privacy we feel more and more alienated and lonely when we get it.

Andrew Hacker sees all this as signaling *The End of the American Era*. For Slater it means *American Culture at the Breaking Point*. Peter Berger labels it the era of *The Homeless Mind*. And all of them muse over Rilke's observation: "Who has no home now will not build one anymore. Who is alone now will remain alone." Doubtless the situation is fraught with the possibilities suggested by these writers. It sparkles with questions existential. But because it centers around the ways individuals divorce themselves from the public and institutional world, and may involve an illusory sense of freedom, it has dramatic implications relative to social control.

privatization and social control

To the extent that the institutional sectors of society are always sources and agents of social control, it follows from our analysis that the traditional sources of institutional control are distributed over a fragmented gamut. But this is not to suggest some kind of chaotic anarchism in the social order. The traditional overt authority of the institutional sectors has been replaced by a more subtle and thereby perhaps more oppressive source of manipulation and control. Today, our society is held together and individuals are quite effectively but subtly manipulated by a bureaucratic and technological logic. The industrial-productive apparatus grinds pervasively, determining "not only the socially needed occupations, skills, and attitudes, but also individual needs and aspirations"[15] and all that which goes into the gaudy promises of a consumer society. Bureaucracy, technology, and the whole productive machinery combine, then, to make for very effective integration and social control. They are so effective because, among other things, the new controls "appear to be the very embodiment of Reason for the benefit of all social groups and interests — to such an extent that all contradiction seems irrational and all counteraction impossible."[16]

It is this effective controlling character of modern advanced industrialized society which permits us to speak of the paradoxical phenomenon experienced by modern man: felt freedom on the one hand and pervasive social control on the other.

Structurally pluralistic society does allow for the pursuit of privacy, but the controlling forces to which we have referred "define what is worthy and desirable." Everyone tends, then, to "independently, but monotonously, . . . pursue the same thing in the same way."[17] However, because individuals do their pursuing in isolation from each other, and because the forces which control also define that which is worthy of pursuit, the manipulative and controlling power of these forces are masked.[18] As Zijderveld observes, they never crystallize in a form of obvious tyranny and totalitarianism. Indeed, by converging in ways which create not only the voids to which we referred earlier, but also the means seemingly to satisfy the needs endemic to the voids, the "system blunts the individual's recognition that it contains no parts which do not communicate the repressive power of the whole."[19] All this speaks to a state of alienation, but it is a unique form since that from which individuals are alienated is that in which they find the means for pursuing privacy and, hence, more alienation. This is a more progressive stage of alienation than that usually described. For the public world has become entirely objective; the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence.

The relationship between institutional and group segmentation and social control now becomes clear. In a fragmented world, the individual pursues loneliness, is rewarded materially for doing it, feels free in so doing, and is more likely, therefore, to submit to powerful social control and manipulation than he would were a total involvement demanded of him. Rebellion, refusal to go along, occurs only when the individual is not allowed to develop some kind of private sphere and individual autonomy to exercise that sphere. Thus, control and manipulation will be strong only if it demands partial involvement from the individual.[20]

This helps us to understand the contradictory experience of personal freedom and social control. In short, social control in a structurally pluralistic society is so strong and pervasive precisely because the social order is pluralistic. Because it is pluralistic, it fragments and privatizes experience which, in turn, raises the individual's threshold for accepting more social control.[21]

Into all this enter demands from the "great campaign against the public schools" for de-schooling society as a whole and for creating all kinds of variegated alternatives to public schooling. "Great campaigners" generally, and de-schoolers particularly, are protesting over and rebelling from the forces

of social control which so effectively manipulate and coerce modern man. But their educational and schooling recommendations for combating these forces actually would serve, if they have not already, to intensify those conditions which make for effective and powerful social control in the first place. What de-schooling, for example, holds out, at least in the initial stages, is further fragmentation hence greater privatization and social control. To call for de-schooling in what in a real sense is an already de-schooled society is absurd and recklessly tempts the forces of oppressive social control. We do not need less public schooling, when schooling means rooting individuals in socially formative institutional arrangements, we probably need more to combat privatization. For problems owing to the arrogant use of power, lack of purpose, consumerism, and so on are institutional, not psychological, moral or political. They cannot be dealt with by reaffirming our faith in eternal verities, by pampering the solitary ego, by invoking righteousness, by tuning in to alpha-waves, by working for spiritual transformation, or by calling for more institutional fragmentation. Thus, I agree with Maxine Greene when she says:

> I do not think that oppressiveness, and consumerism, and racism, and violence can be overcome through changes in personal consciousness divorced from institutional stances. I do not think it will be enough to reconceive our reality and our "democratic personality," to *see* differently, as so many young "dropouts" apparently see. It will be necessary to come to terms with power conceived as something other than "personal growth" — the power of the state, which at some point must be expected to change hands. I do not believe de-schooling will ensure that happening; I do not believe that "dialectic encounter," no matter how rich, can compensate for the alienation experienced in the corporate society *or* lead to the taking of power in any significant sense.[22]

I refer to the de-schooling syndrome only briefly by way of emphasizing that I am more confident about what the school ought not to do than what it should or can do. If at all possible, the school should not, it seems to me, contribute to forces which increase fragmentation and privatization. This is no easy job, given the school as the dependent variable in the school-society relationship. But it is within this context that I am led to conclude that the public school idea was indeed great. For it was conceived as a means of, among other things, combating and insuring against fragmentation, privatization and unchecked social control. It is this aspect of the public school as a concept which I am convinced must be promoted. In this sense the task for public schooling is not unlike what

Freeman Butts has described as the major function of the schools. He put it this way: "The chief end of American education is the promotion of a new civism appropriate to the principles of a just society in the United States and a just world community. We have forgotten or simply mouthed these goals; now we must advance them in full seriousness as the first order of business for the future."[23]

I do not believe, however, that we have forgotten what these goals are, or that we have merely mouthed romantic niceties on their behalf. I think, rather, that we are lacking in those socially and culturally binding ideals which are necessary to a conception of civism and, hence, community. The ideals upon which a conception of civism must be based, thus civism itself, are then unknown, or at best, amorphous. Moreover, the public school as it exists today has itself served those forces which have led to fragmentation and its attendant ills. Thus, when I say the school is important, I am not speaking of the school as it exists; rather, I have in mind the idea or conception of an institution which engenders community and belongingness. We are giving up on this great idea when we fragment the institutional concept implied by it through attempts at de-schooling, creating alternative institutions, and the like. Our first order of business should be aimed at recapturing the dream of creating an institution — public, universal, and compulsory — whose major task is to bind and cement. We will probably come up with something quite different from what we have. I am convinced that we will come up, nevertheless, with one, not many, institutions. And we will come up with something based upon a truth deeply embedded in the public school idea and which today is in need of revitalization: Institutional and group affiliation and commitment is necessary to the well-being of individuals.

footnotes

1. Robert M. Hutchins, "The Schools Must Stay," *The Center Magazine* (January/February, 1973), p. 12.
2. See R. Freeman Butts, "Assaults on a Great Idea," *The Nation* (April 30, 1973), pp. 553-560.
3. See for example: Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Book, 1966; Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1967; Warren Bennis and Philip Slater, *The Temporary Society*, New York: Harper and Row, 1968; Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1970; Anton C. Zijderveld, *The Abstract Society*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor

Book, 1971; Charles Tesconi and Van Cleve Morris, *The Anti-Man Culture,* Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1972.

4. Charles Frankel, *The Case for Modern Man,* Boston: Beacon Press, 1959, pp. 200-201.

5. Anton C. Zijderveld, *The Abstract Society,* Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Book, 1971, p. 136.

6. Frankel, p. 200.

7. Zijderveld, p. 136.

8. Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion,* New York: Macmillan, 1967, p. 97.

9. *Ibid.,* p. 96.

10. Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness,* Boston: Beacon Press, 1970, p. 7.

11. *Ibid.,* p. 7.

12. Luckmann, p. 97.

13. Zijderveld, p. 138.

14. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man,* Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, p. 14.

15. *Ibid.,* p. 5.

16. *Ibid.,* p. 9.

17. Slater, p. 9.

18. Marcuse, p. 11.

19. *Ibid.,* p. 11.

20. Zijderveld, p. 130.

21. *Ibid.,* p. 130.

22. Maxine Greene, "And Still It Is News," *After De-Schooling, What?* Alan Gartner, et al., Editors, Evanston: Harper and Row, 1973, p. 136.

23. Butts, p. 559.