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The Limits to Growth

Adolescence in Canada

What are the young of Canada being trained for? What is our society doing to them during adolescence — a state of life, Friedenberg reminds us, that society itself has created? Is the docility that many find so characteristic of the nation a desirable thing, and do our schools really induce anything else? The inculcation of self-discipline and self-restraint without self-confidence and self-esteem lead to what has been called trained incapacity, which it is the object of the system to produce. He fears that the establishment of a sense of existential despair may be a fundamental function of the socializing process, for upon it depends the stability of a modern society — if it must have stability, that is.

Within the past few years, one country in North America seems clearly to have surpassed all the others in the quality of opportunity it has provided to young people — especially young males — to demonstrate fully to themselves and to others who they were and what they could do; to measure themselves against very exacting social demands and to establish their dignity firmly in their own eyes and in the minds of their neighbours. The programme by which that government made this extraordinary growth possible was extremely costly both in funds and personnel, and even costlier to the adolescents who became most completely involved in it. It is no longer in operation, though it will doubtless serve as an example to the young of other nations. But while it was going on, it provided those who survived it with a sense of personal worth and competence, deeply rooted in their sense of community, which few young people in the Americas can have enjoyed in the past twenty years — and anglophones, not for two centuries perhaps. The surviving young of Nicaragua owe President Somoza Debayle a debt which they, unfortunately, can never hope to repay.

Canadian young people don't get this kind of service from their government. Even if Premier Lévesque wins his referendum they probably won't — at least, not on a national scale. The extravagances of a Somoza would be regarded

as in poor taste here and as clearly inimical to peace, order, and good government — though these, Somoza always insisted, were just what he was trying to maintain. We deal differently with our young, and we expect them to respond differently in turn; to behave, as we often say, more responsibly and with greater maturity. To this end we send them to be processed in schools.

I have begun this discourse on a political note because that, far from being a digression, is the most direct way to approach my topic. Adolescence is a political condition, not a biological or psychological one; though, like all political conditions, it has psychological concomitants; and like some others, it has biologically distinctive roots. Somoza's National Guard killed many — perhaps a majority — of Nicaraguan males between 14 and 25. How many adolescents survived? None, I should imagine; the survivors grew up fast. Young women too. I wouldn't like to be the editor of a Nicaraguan high school yearbook. In fact, I'm sure there ain't no such thing, if there ever was. The adolescent role has been suspended, or abolished, in such parts of the world.

Discipline and restraint, for what purpose?

But not in Canada. We still make them here; they are to be found in most shopping plazas, though the management makes them unwelcome; and they are featured in a plethora of television commercials. Doctrinaire nationalists perceive them as evidence of American cultural pollution; most adults regard them as good-for-nothing in their present form. They are valued as a necessary stage in the production of tomorrow's Canadians, and as a stimulus to, though a drain upon, the economy. They usually can't or are not permitted to get jobs themselves. But they make jobs — thousands of jobs — for teachers, social workers, policemen, fast-food operators, and the mercenaries of popular culture. In recent years, a strain of teen-ager has evolved which is said to be highly resistant — almost impervious — to schooling. This has required a large expansion of specialized educational services, and has been wonderful for the economy.

The position of youth in Canadian society, as in western culture generally, is really rather curious. How can it have come to pass that about a fifth of the population is defined as good-for-nothing precisely at the age of maximum physical vigour and emotional commitment? Why are they isolated in order to teach them? Most teacher training institutions still profess, in theory, to believe in learning by doing *and* in the most complete possible participation in the affairs of the community. To understand what schools actually do, instead, is to understand how adolescents are made.

They are made in schools — there are no teen-agers in nature, just men and women of a certain age. The schools do not, of course, do the job unaided. Other social institutions, notably the family, contribute as much or more. But the schools are youth-factories. In stating this, I am not ignoring or even disparaging their educational function; I am merely subsuming it under socialization. The purpose of education, as Durkheim so long ago observed, is socialization, while

that of socialization is to get people to want to do what they will have to do anyway. And even more — though I don't think Durkheim said so — to keep them from wanting to do, or from even realizing that they could do, things that would disrupt the existing social order. Nicaragua did not have a very effective or comprehensive school system; Quebec, perhaps fortunately, has several.

There is nothing novel about this observation. The mid-nineteenth century founders of modern educational systems were quite candid in promising that compulsory schooling would imbue the young with a gentle and prudent self-policing action, thus saving the community some of the costs and risks of external coercion. Egerton Ryerson made quite a point of this,¹ as did Daniel Webster² in the U.S., in almost the same language and at almost the same point in time. They had no reason not to be candid; from their class and value position, they were offering the potentially riotous young a valuable service. Most Canadians would probably agree with them today. And, indeed, self-restraint and self-discipline are virtues when not carried to extremes, useful to nearly everybody at one time or another.

But self-discipline and self-restraint are not prominent among the characteristics engendered in today's youth by the internalization of the norms of schooling. They would, in any case, be maladaptive in a consumer society with a high inflation rate. These virtues are not highly esteemed in our society: they have come to be widely recognized as more beneficial to those who urge them on others than to those who practice them; and they require, for successful practice, more self-confidence and more self-esteem than we like to see our young people develop. What, then, are these benign internal police there to prevent the young from doing, and to whom? One cannot, surely, assess the value of a police force without considering the nature of the criminal code and the system of justice.

Education is not the principal function of schooling

Before turning to the question of the way schooling affects the development of the young, one *caveat* should be issued. In Canada, as in most other societies, the most important functions of the school are not derived from their effect on the minds and hearts of the young. Schools provide jobs — more than any other single institution does — and most of those jobs, contrary to folklore, are now relatively highly paid. Teaching is a very labour-intensive industry in Canada, it is well-organized and doesn't rest on a large blue-collar substrate. There are clerks, custodians, and sometimes cooks, but most of the scut-work is done by teachers, at teachers' salaries. So schools, as I have said, provide hundreds of thousands of jobs, and result in billions of dollars in provincial and sometimes Federal funds being channeled into local communities. The industry is bigger and more reliable than the fishery. (People can continue to function throughout adolescence with a mercury content so high as to render them total-

ly unfit to eat, and before developing symptoms of Minamata disease severe enough to affect attendance.)

I am bringing this up again, not to re-emphasize the economic issue, but to make it very clear that in writing about how schools produce adolescents I am already, at the outset, being misleadingly conventional by implying that educating the young — for better and/or for worse — is basically what the schools are all about. Well, it isn't. Schooling is unlike most other heavy industries in at least one respect; there are hardly any quality-controls on the product. There doesn't really even have to *be* a product, as long as the operations that sustain the economy are carried out. The kids have to be there, not so much because of what schooling is expected to do to them as because it would be inconvenient to have them any place else. High school graduates who can't read or earn a living are not recalled for repairs; no compensation is paid them, their parents, or their employers for losses or damage incurred. There have been no successful malpractice suits against schools in the U.S., where malpractice suits menace even lawyers who neglect the interests of their clients; and not even any *unsuccessful* ones in Canada. Schools are unique in being, even today, unaccountable to their clients for the quality of services rendered, if their pupils are to be regarded as clients; and unaccountable for wastage of raw material, if the pupils are to be regarded as that.

So, in consenting to devote the rest of this paper to the schools' *educational* function I must be careful not to reinforce an image of their function — already widely accepted — that I believe to be false. But it is false only in emphasis. Even though education is *not* the principal function of compulsory school attendance, schooling certainly affects the development of the young people subjected to it. It does so partly through what is formally taught in class; it does so much more through the informal experiences youngsters have there — the so-called "hidden curriculum," though it is visible enough to the astute observer; and it does so partly through the sheer, brute experience of having to be there day after day, year after year, regardless of what else you might better be doing. That teaches you something really unforgettable about what it is to be Canadian.

So, back, then to what those internalized police are doing.

Internalized police

As I see it, the most important educational change schools bring about in producing Canadian adolescents is the development of a sense of what Thorstein Veblen used to call "trained incapacity." Veblen considered this a very important part of the training of people for jobs in which their subordinate status requires them to refrain from doing what they can do very well, and know to be necessary, but are not authorized to do. Nurses, for example, must not give injections that have not been ordered by the attending physician even if they

know the case well enough not only to know what is needed but to know that the patient may die before a doctor can be found. Learning to let the patient die is part of a nurse's training — that's trained incapacity. So, of course, is learning to obey your oath of secrecy as a civil servant instead of letting people know how the government has ill-used them, even though you are convinced they have a right to know. In a somewhat larger sense, most of the moral shoddiness the world depends on to do its business, from RCMP dirty tricks to selling defective cars, to maintaining with the pomposity of a Chairman of the Treasury Board that moral judgments should have no bearing on who Canada trades with or what we sell them — all that is "trained incapacity." People have to *learn*; they have to be *taught* not to do what they can plainly see they could do, ought to do, and would prefer to do if they hadn't learned better than to even think about doing it.

Schools teach this emphatically and incessantly, by punishing "back talk"; by punishing as inattention any attention given to unauthorized sources of input, however relevant; by routines that determine the nature and extent of each pupil's participation in class and other school activities on grounds of authority rather than competence or interest. The process is by no means confined to the schooling of working-class kids to accept what's available without making trouble. The best study of the process in a Canadian school that I know is Eleanor Smollett's "Schools and the Illusion of Choice: the Middle Class and the 'Open' Classroom," in George Martell (editor), *The Politics of Canadian Schools*. Smollett shows how, and how carefully, the schools develop a very high level of human incapacity, especially the incapacity to consider and take personal responsibility for the ends, as well as the means, of human action. You can't get much more seriously incapacitated than that.

Some readers will doubtless find me grossly biased against the schools, not only in attributing such destructive functions to them but, even more blatantly, in ignoring their more useful ones. Don't the schools teach pupils positively useful skills and attitudes in the course of socializing them — expressive skills as well as inhibitions? Like Archimedes seeking to move the earth, I would need some place to stand outside the system before I could address such a question as this. It is obviously true that the "hidden curriculum" is a powerful and, indeed, indispensable source of the social skills and attitudes that are functional in Canadian society. But I lack the authority to pass final judgement on whether it enhances or detracts. Schools play a major role in making Canadian youth what they are today. It keeps them from getting all pushy and thinking they can do anything, like Americans; it keeps them from becoming fluent in the wrong official language without insisting that they become competent in either. Let's just say, with Michelangelo, that the school chips away the marble and reveals the statue that was there all the time. Marble doesn't bleed, or grow scar tissue — which makes sculpture on the whole a less messy profession than schooling.

Trained incapacities

I am sceptical that the official curriculum has, by its content, important effects on people that might have been achieved more effectively by leaving them

free, to seek instruction as the need arose. Paul Goodman used to complain a lot about the way schools teach reading; he thought they kept people from becoming willing and able to read deeply and voraciously for pleasure, as autodidacts do, and sometimes from learning to read at all. I am sure he was right. I suspect, too, that I have found it easier to gain some real understanding about Canadian history and the Canadian political system precisely because I was not taught them in school and had no propaganda to unlearn, while, as a newcomer, I found them both important and fascinating. Canadians more often seem to think they are boring. My scepticism extends to the content of vocational education, too, regardless of level. Both the trades and the professions compel their practitioners to spend years learning skills and concepts that will be out of date before they get a chance to practice them. The professions, by controlling entrance and licensing, successfully conceal the fact that you don't need all this to do the work competently — though in Canada, as elsewhere, people are still sent to jail occasionally for practicing medicine, sometimes for decades, without a licence. But the armed forces have established that most technical skills can be taught very satisfactorily in a few weeks — especially since their students have access to the kind of equipment they will actually be using, which schools cannot afford to provide.

But the armed forces are not concerned with instilling in their recruits the social identity that goes with the *trade* they are teaching them. On the contrary, they are trying to teach them the social identity of the military man; and in doing this, they are as prodigal as any profession. That's where the chicken-shit comes in. Military training, as such, is also largely devoted to establishing trained incapacity, the incapacity to question orders, to take what would otherwise be a normal interest in one's own survival or in the purposes for which one is being used, the curious inability to shoot one of your own officers at close range when one has learned to fell the enemy with a rifle shot from a distance of two hundred yards.

The widespread prevalence of trained incapacity is a fundamental test of social development. In a folk or primitive society, there are few differentiated social roles, and these few are usually ceremonial, priestly. In practical spheres of life, any adult male may do and can do what any other may and can do; any adult female may and can do what any other adult female may and can do. There are no adolescents: one is a child until puberty, and one is then initiated into full membership in the society, though there are still gradations of prestige based on competence and seniority. And there are no schools. But where there are highly differentiated social roles, as in modern, industrial societies, nothing is more essential to social order than keeping one person from doing another's job, especially if she is convinced she can do it better, and most especially if she is right. The adolescent role is where you learn this: internalize the prohibition, even though it means becoming alienated from your own potential and actual abilities, and even worse, from much of your perceptions of reality.

An ultimate sense of existential despair

But adolescence is not simply a training period; it is also a period of time, a term, during which the individual is regarded as unqualified, as a person without socially significant qualities. More frequently unemployed than any other cohort of the population, called irresponsible while being denied any opportunity to assume responsibility, defined as economically unproductive and hence as a burden on the family and the taxpayer, adolescents find themselves much in the position of inmates in a minimum-security prison — with an abundance of counsellors and structured programmes for recreation and rehabilitation, but isolated at great expense and kept from annoying or threatening established members of society. When they break out, they can be troublesome, largely (like convicts) because they then have no place to go that they have any right to be, and no means of supporting themselves when they get there. Usually, though, they are recaptured before they can do too much damage.

The social costs of adolescence are incalculable. Wasted opportunities for growth amount to more than the time and human productivity irrecoverably lost. They permanently prevent the person from becoming all that he might have been, and limit his value to himself and to others. Adolescence, in fact, is a grave existential insult, felt as such by the young even though they do not understand just what has happened to them. I would suggest that the conflict between generations that has become pervasive in industrial society is rooted in profound existential guilt — shared guilt. At some level, the adult is well aware of what he is doing in setting humiliating limits to growth for his and other people's sons and daughters. He knows, after all, what happened to his own vision of what life might be. But the young, too, blame themselves for their own complicity in accepting the terms their society offers. This is particularly debilitating to young Canadians, whose society possesses no tradition by which resistance might be honoured, even when it is unsuccessful. Despite the CBC's belated and equivocal efforts on behalf of Louis Riel, Canada has no rebel heroes. So whichever way you grow up in Canada, rebellious or conformist, you're likely to lose a lot of your self-respect.

What seems saddest of all is the conclusion, which I think inevitable, that this ultimate sense of existential despair is, in fact, an absolutely fundamental function of the socializing process. Modern society depends for its stability on the widespread conviction that, despite its numerous and manifest absurdities, contradictions, and injustices, nothing can be done — not just in a particular hopeless situation, but in general. Social action, as such, is either useless or illegitimate. There are even good and skilful writers, like Joan Didion, who make this their central, highly fashionable message. Adolescence is a wonderful way of getting young and vigorous people to feel in their increasingly weary bones that, indeed, nothing can be done. For eight or ten years, they've been doing it.

It is true, I think, that effective social action is usually illegitimate, since it is the nature of law to prohibit anything that promises to rearrange drastically the

present distribution of power. Those societies in which the young learn to prefer illegitimacy to acquiescence and impotence have the best prospect for continued vitality. Illegitimacy is good for character; it stimulates alertness and a sense of personal responsibility, or at least of having your arse on the line. As Bob Dylan used to sing, in the days when he was so useful in sustaining the young through their own moral quests, "If you live outside the law you must be honest!" This isn't always true (it doesn't seem to be for the RCMP, among others). But it is nevertheless an avenue toward personal and social development that young Canadians have left too little explored.

NOTES

1. Alison Prentice, *The School Promoters* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), pp. 50-51.
2. Clarence J. Karier, "Business Values and the Educational State," in Clarence J. Karier, Paul C. Violas, and J. Spring, *Roots of Crisis* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973), p. 11.

