

THE MANUFACTURE OF SUBJECTION: A CRITIQUE OF COMPULSORY STATE EDUCATION

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1. Introduction: Relevance of Education

Criticising State interference in education is more challenging than most other libertarian positions. The belief in the need for State interference in education is so deeply rooted that even most classical liberals, including the most radical of them, rarely doubted the wisdom of such interference. Criticising State interference in education is criticising one of the three fundamentals of the State itself. These three fundamentals of the State are:

Monopoly of defence to guarantee the physical stability of the State in a given territory,

Monopoly of justice to regulate the social life in a given territory the way the statist elite want it, and

Monopoly of education to foster the psychology of subjugation.

My purpose here is to give a rough outline of how the State implements a psychology of subjugation through its interference in education.

2. Philosophical Background: The Psychology of Subjugation

The official ideology of our democratic ruling class holds that State control of education is bad if exercised by a dictatorship forcing all educational agents to act in uniformity. Experience tells us that forced uniformity leads to widespread distrust by people of anything the government says. Thus, long years of educational tyranny in the Eastern Bloc failed to turn people into true believing Communists.

From my main teacher in libertarianism, American philosopher Paul Goodman, I learned a different answer to the question of how the State “produces” its subjects. It is not the content communicated by State

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regulated education which matters, Paul Goodman argued, but the *fact of coercion itself* which destroys self-reliance. When people are deprived of the control over their lives and subsequently feel powerless, they are eager to identify with the ruling force in order to regain some feeling of power. This psychological mechanism was called by Goodman “the psychology of being powerless”.¹ That is, the State overwhelms us by violence and in return we give the State the “sanction of the victims”, as Ayn Rand put it.²

Goodman’s insight into the psychology of getting the sanction of the powerless immediately explains the breakdown of the Eastern Bloc as well as other political revolutions. A State is rejected by the people not when it is strong, but when it is weak. If a State displays weakness instead of glorious force then it cannot any longer supply a satisfactory object for self-identification by the masses.

The psychology of powerlessness, however, is not only a property of dictatorships. So-called democratic States also produce and utilise this psychology. As Leo Tolstoy said, from the individual’s point of view there is no difference whether you as one of a hundred people are governed by one person or by fifty-one.

So I am speaking of the State in general, whether it be a democracy or a dictatorship or any other conceivable variety of government.

I will make use of the Goodman/Rand view of the psychology of powerlessness and the sanction of the victim in a particular way. Following the methodological advice of French philosopher Michel Foucault,³ I presume that exercising power both depends upon and produces specific forms of knowledge, whether it does so consciously or not. In the context of libertarian theory I want to call this knowledge the *psychology of subjugation*.

Every action of the State has an “educational” aspect insofar as it educates people into a psychology of subjugation. But for practical reasons I will concentrate on the two main educational institutions set up by the State, the family and the schools, which affect *all* citizens. I will not consider the other two forms, prisons and mental institutions, which affect only special selected persons.

3. Analysing Educational Institutions: The Family

The family itself, of course, is not a product of State intervention. It is much older than the State and it continues to exist apart from the State. But the State interferes in the family structure, thereby changing its social significance. The State grants the parents control over the children up to an artificially set age.

This deeply affects family relationships. As a result the family is not a freely formed group living together by internally agreed upon rules as long as they want to, for at least some members of the family are forced to stay by an outside power. And this power corrupts as all power does. While parents, from a libertarian perspective, are entitled to lay down rules regarding behaviour in their own property, this is an entirely different thing from them saying: “Up to your eighteenth birthday you must stay with us, and if you try to choose otherwise the police will force you to return.” The difference is clearly one of acting in a situation of voluntary interaction and in a situation of coercion. Social institutions have a tendency to become both stupid and tyrannical if not checked by the market, namely by the right to refrain or “exit” from the interaction. When given the chance to force others to “obey orders”, people are gradually corrupted and substitute obstinacy and dogmatism for discussion and persuasion.

The corruption of the family by force doesn’t only affect the admittedly few - but often heartbreaking - cases in which children who try to leave their parents are coerced back, but *changes the very meaning of the family*. The family is changed from a social arrangement structured by mutual free interactions to a political hierarchy.

The early lesson the child learns from the politicised family is that it does not own itself but is owned by someone else. This clearly is the first stage of producing the psychology of powerlessness. Moreover, by making the parents the agents of subjugation, the rebellious child fights the parents, not the State which is only temporarily making the parents its agents of subjugation.

Ultimately, children remain the property of the State. The State can remove children from parents if it decides that they are unsuitable in some way. And, of course, the State generally thinks that parents are not qualified to teach their children and enforces compulsory State education.

4. Analysing Educational Institutions: The Schools

Compulsory State education is, whatever its specific contents or methods, the ultimate demonstration of State ownership of the children’s bodies and of the parents’ souls. Coercive parental control is sanctioned by the State, but the State denies or limits parents’ freedom to choose the schooling. This traps the parents psychologically. Being in reality powerless in this respect, they can only continue to enjoy a feeling of power over the child by identifying with the State’s decisions. Thus they grant the sanction of the victim.

The children are in a similar position. They are powerless but their impulse of rebellion is checked by

their love of the parents. The children know, or at least feel, that school is compulsory. But because the parents are trapped into submitting to the State they act as if they want the children to go to school. Thus, any rebellion against State education is directed against the loved parents, not against the real aggressor, the State.

Teachers, too, are trapped by compulsory schooling. The children are not there through free choice. Teachers function, in effect, as prison warders. Moreover, teachers, like everybody else, participate in the psychology of powerlessness and therefore benefit from the State's sub-leasing of power over the pupils. On the other hand, many teachers also *like* youngsters and are eager to help them grow up. Whatever the respective strengths of such contradictory motivations amongst teachers, children are exposed to a lesson in adult hypocrisy. Teachers say they want to help, but come on as aggressors.

Consider the following story, told by libertarian teacher James Herndon in his book *How to Survive in Your Native Land*.⁴ Inspired by the anti-authoritarian criticism of education in the sixties, Herndon started giving lessons in creativity. At first glance, he succeeded very well. Pupils told him how they preferred his lessons to "the usual stuff". Then Herndon went a step further and told the pupils that they were free to come and go, despite what school rules, compulsory attendance laws and their parents said. Of course, this was a risky thing to do. But the worst experience was inflicted not by the head of the school but by the pupils. They stopped attending his lessons. Herndon's conclusion was, quite correctly: their preference for his lessons over others was the choice of *slaves*, not of free people. Given *real* freedom to choose, they made an entirely different choice. But even this was not his final conclusion. Because children were obliged by law to go to school and consequently *forbidden to work, to travel or to do anything else free people are allowed to do*, the alternative for the pupils was largely boredom. Herndon concluded that since he could not give the pupils liberty, he was still wasting their time. Therefore he went back to giving "real lessons".

His ultimate conclusion was that it was not possible for a teacher to make a decent decision. If he uses coercion he acts on behalf of the State to produce subjects. But if he drops the use of power the teacher opens up nothing but emptiness. Thus, Herndon arrived at the same position as Paul Goodman. The solution to mis-education is not to *reform* government schools but to *abolish* the compulsory education laws.

Another striking example of the insidious subtleties of the psychology of subjugation is as follows. Although it is the State which gives teachers power over the pupils, the rules of the State also limits the degree of arbitrariness which they can exercise. Thus it

seems to make the State the friend of the pupils. The only way a pupil can fight injustice suffered because of a teacher's arbitrary action is to show that it is against the law of the State. Within the existing system, then, even rebellion serves to turn the pupil into a law-abiding "citizen". On the other hand, teachers can confirm their power over pupils only by adhering closely to the rules of the State. Thus, both sides of the conflict submit without hesitation to the State which is the true origin of the conflict in the first place. What a hideous irony.

5. Summing Up the Psychology of Subjugation

To sum up the psychology of subjugation: The function of State interference in education is to produce *subjects*, and its means are by transforming the family structure and controlling the schools.

The educational monopoly of the State raises questions deeper than the customary economic considerations of whether a monopoly of, say, potato supply will bring about a potato shortage. The educational monopoly is one of the instruments of the State to manipulate our most personal relations and our reactions to the effects of all other examples of State power (such as whether to accept a food shortage or even a famine induced by government action).

Although there are some significant international variations in the structure of the educational monopoly, no modern statist infrastructure has been formed without such a monopoly.

The core of this monopoly, and next to taxation the oldest of all government interventions, is the transformation of the family from a free community into a hierarchical political institution. The transformation of the family affects each and every human being by changing the very meaning of growing up. Young people are not growing up in a natural and free world but in an artificial world of political power and harassment.

Compulsory schooling is a more specific part of the educational monopoly, not employed by every modern State. But the more complex society gets, the more government tends to monopolise or at least to control the schools and to coerce young people into schools, private or public. The effect of this is that young people are not allowed to get free education in the sense of education in freedom, although they are getting the public coercive education for "free". But they do not learn by choosing and deciding to be self-conscious and competent. Historically, monopolising the schools meant the takeover by the State of already existing voluntarily formed educational institutions. Contrary to what the official history tells us, it was not government intervention which brought the masses of people into the schools. The masses were already increasingly attending schools which suited

them. The State, unable to prevent such education totally, intervened to make schools fit its own statist goals.⁵

Roughly speaking there are three stages in the State production of adult subjects:

- (1) Laws regulating the family structure demonstrate to children that they are powerless against their parents.
- (2) Compulsory schooling laws show parents, children and teachers that they are powerless against the State.
- (3) Children, parents, and teachers realise that in submitting to the State they can regain some feeling of power.

After experiencing these three stages adults emerge with a psychology of powerlessness and are ready to give the sanction of the victim to most exercises of State power over them.

6. Essentials of the Libertarian Position on Education

Against the background of the views outlined above, I offer my view of three essentials of a libertarian position on education:

(1) Libertarianism does not decide what the right style of education is.

As in all other fields, the libertarian has to differentiate between a personal position and a general criticism. Whether a libertarian prefers a “progressive” or a “conservative” style of education, or something else, he nevertheless favours freedom to choose. Even if I prefer, say, “progressive” education, and State schools follow “progressive” practice, a libertarian still opposes State control of education.

The libertarian position is sometimes portrayed as a kind of extreme relativism. But in my view it is not. What I and other libertarians are saying is that coercion, violence, and political power in general transform every process of which they are a part. Thus I, as a more or less “progressive” educator oppose the use of progressive methods in State schools not because I think I probably might be wrong, but because mixing up “progressivism” with coercion destroys the very meaning of progressivism. You cannot give a lesson in freedom to pupils forced into your classroom. The same is true for “conservative” educators. They are unable to *test* their *personal* authority when they are speaking in front of pupils disciplined by an *outside* force. Therefore we all, progressive and conservative and any other educators, can join in the fight against government schools without endorsing relativism. We can remain confident in our own specific beliefs and continue to argue and to quarrel passionately about the right style of education.

(2) In the context of coercion education is nothing but the manufacture of subjection, and cannot in spite of any good intentions be otherwise.

By interfering in education the government teaches that people do not belong to themselves but that they are subjects of the State. This lesson is learned implicitly, whatever the stated aims of education are. Let a libertarian Secretary of Education require the study of Paul Goodman’s *Gestalt Therapy* in psychology lessons, Murray Rothbard’s *Ethics of Liberty* in philosophy lessons, Ludwig von Mises’ *Human Action* in social science lessons, and Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* in literature lessons; let the same Secretary make obligatory teacher training in non-aggressive communication and teaching - if there is compulsory schooling, if there is a State monopoly of schools, if children are denied human rights, then the real lesson of subjugation is learned.

(3) Criticising the educational monopoly is to preach social revolution.

We do not need “voucher” plans, as advocated by some libertarians.⁶ The experience of vouchers in some districts of California shows that this reform is merely used to build up a *new* bureaucracy and to *strengthen* State control of schools. It is not possible to “de-regulate” education within the existing structure of the State. A rejection of the educational monopoly is a rejection of the manufacture of subjugation.

The State *needs* the psychology of subjugation, or it would vanish. Thus, even if we succeed in de-regulating some *part* of the educational monopoly, the State would find other fields to conquer. What we need is a programme and a strategy to roll back the State in all its manifestations. To create such a programme, we have to start by rooting out the statist way of thinking in our own minds and in the minds of our fellows.

NOTES

1. Paul Goodman, “The Psychology of Being Powerless”, 1966, in Goodman, *Nature Heals*, Free Life Editions, New York, 1977, pp. 134-142.
2. A phrase coined in her novel *Atlas Shrugged*, New American Library, New York, 1957.
3. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1975.
4. James Herndon, *How To Survive in Your Native Land*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1975.
5. See E. G. West, *Education and the Industrial Revolution*, B. T. Batsford, London and Sydney, 1975.
6. For an overview, see Eleanor Farrar and David K. Cohen, “Power to the Parents? The Story of Educational Vouchers”, in *Public Interest*, Summer 1977, pp. 72-97; and E. G. West, “The Prospects for Education Vouchers”, in Everhart (ed.), *The Public School Monopoly*, Pacific Institute for Public Policy Research, San Francisco, 1982.