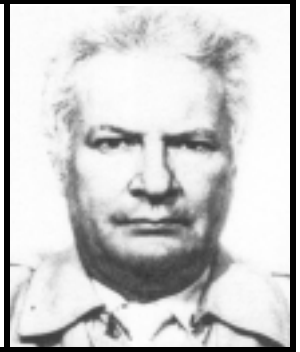


THE CONTRADICTIONS OF SOCIALIST EDUCATION

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How does one deal with an ailing nationalised industry, especially one which does not market its products? What are the grounds for retaining education within the socialist sector of a “mixed” economy? Those who doubt that “socialist” is the appropriate word for our educational arrangements in societies such as ours might consider:

- (a) Education is mostly publicly financed.
- (b) A large stretch of education is *compulsory*.

(Put these two points together and you may summarise them by calling education a “compulsory extension of the social wage”.)

- (c) Education is effectively monopolistic or quasi-monopolistic, especially in the years below the minimum leaving-age.

It must be conceded, admittedly, that socialist education in a non-socialist society is not the same as education in a generally socialist society. Under socialism proper education is an agency of government in the most direct sense. The structure of decision-making is very clear, even when policy-making may be ineffective or contradictory. Power is formally vested in the state.

Socialist education in societies such as ours, by contrast, is a strange hybrid, involving a bizarre mix of outlooks, ideologies and practices. There is little doubt that it is characterised by radical malfunctions and dysfunctions. It teaches inadequately what the general public may be taken as wanting. It is not good at delivering literacy, numeracy and high standards of behaviour. So what education *should* do it does badly. At the same time the system is dysfunctional. It transmits at time errors and minority obsessions. It is suffused with egalitarian ideology, for example, largely internally manufactured. Certainly the outside society is *not* egalitarian. Nor for a decade has the elected government been egalitarian. The system is thus unrepresentative.

On the whole, however, the system is *not* characterised by extremism. Rather, the problem is that education is drifting and aimless, up for grabs, buffeted by competing factions and interest groups. The precise location of curricular power is, indeed, hard to specify. Some teachers, especially union activists, some education journalists, some of the national and local inspectorate, some of the educa-

tional professoriat, some civil servants: in this motley crew are to be found, in various combinations, the key personnel of the syndicalist supply nexus. These are the people who decide what shall be taught to the children.

That the education system is inefficient has long been known. Economists are well aware of the shortcomings of nationalisation. Economists, however, have shown no interest in the curricular aspects of nationalisation. For years some of the sociologists have insisted that the main function of the curriculum is the reproduction of the capitalist economy and its social relations. It would be more accurate to say that the education system tends, at least in part, to ward off the imperatives of the business world and to attempt to reproduce its own socialistic preoccupations.

One way of putting the problem is to say that education is beset with pseudo-expertise. Experts are essential in civilisation, but the division of labour is also in some cases a problematic phenomenon. This is especially the case with publicly financed activities which are perceived as important. People rightly think that education matters, but specialist *thinking* about education is mostly supply led, and largely undisciplined by the market. Into the gap come frauds, obsessives and scoundrels, as well as competent and disinterested specialists. Ideologies which vary between vague foolishness and potentially murderous intolerance become institutionalised. These coexist with the ideas of established traditions and practices. Rival and contradictory notions circulate through the structure of decision-making. “Tradition” battles with “progress” and especially with “equality”. Nor is what I regard as the rightness of tradition and the idiocy of equality more than *part* of the problem. The real problem is that most citizens/taxpayers/parents do not get a curricular look-in.

The education system would be more efficient, more coherent and more respected if it were not unambiguously supply-led. Even if I were to enter certain reservations about consumer sovereignty in education — as I am prepared to do — I would still maintain that it is disastrous to exclude the people from education, as Chesterton warned it would be at the start of the century.

The preposterously inflated claims for expertise made by Karl Mannheim still haunt us. The experts have all white people as racists in some LEAs. Alternatively they would encourage all females to see the slights of the male tyranny everywhere. Or they inform us that our culture is no good and that we should take up the study of someone else's. Their most extravagant trick to date has been to identify Teessiders as given to incestuous child-abuses. Perhaps teachers could be called perverts and child-molesters too; after all, we have already been told they are racist.

All the fads of the last three decades are the work of the expertocracy. They are the brain-children of intellectuals, sour or crazed, but undoubtedly elitist. One example is the abolition of streaming in the primary school. What evidence sustained this crucial change? It is advocated, remember, for *secondary* schools in some quarters. There are ILEA secondary schools which are completely mixed-ability.

Another example is found in the cults of the hate-relations industry. These publicly-funded extravaganzas are based on fraudulent evidence. They also enjoy no support outside the chattering intelligensia. They are weird, surrogate Marxisms, financed willy-nilly by John and Mary Citizen.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



That manifest white elephant, designed to destroy privacy, the open-plan classroom, was the work of wholly unrepresentative experts. And look what the curriculum radicals have lately dreamed up for us: world studies, development studies, peace studies, the new history.

The curriculum experts have, in addition, gradually destroyed the teaching of English, and turned Mathematics into Toytown mechanics. They also originated the current fad for team teaching. Not a single one of these innovations enjoyed any real public support.

Maybe comprehensivisation itself had a passing popularity. If so it will have certainly waned now. And our grandchildren will condemn us for abolishing our grammar schools and thank us if we reinstate them. Nor could anything more perfectly capture the sour and hypocritical spirit of elitist radicalism which infects education policy-making in this country than the darling of Highgate, Anthony Crossland, talking about abolishing “every fucking grammar school”. Highgate, be it noted, is still there. One of the central contradictions of the social state is that its experts and authorities end up by penalising their declared beneficiaries. The abolition of the grammar school hurt most the children of the working class.

The development of the “sociological curriculum”, with its manifestly biased and tendentious literature, might look like a popular upsurge. Historically I regard it as a replacement of older cults. The cult of the useless have been ousted by cheap moralising. The sociological afflatus has in fact been a form of privileged intellectual insider trading. It has been a consumption spree for the new middle classes, and one that exemplifies fiscal exploitation. It would not have been sustained on the basis of private finance. It is a regressive curricular rip-off. The theoretical point it so perfectly illustrates is one that has been strangely neglected: the nationalisation of education profoundly modifies the curriculum. More: it changes the underlying principles for the transmission of culture.

It is clear that no one in the government has understood this political economy of education. This explains the most glaring contradiction of the Thatcher years: the continuing build-up of the corporatist state in the education field. Within the panic some worthwhile perceptions are discernible. Children’s basic skills and knowledge and behaviour must be improved. Without this our inner cities will become ungovernable and our economic regeneration will press increasingly on intractable skill constraints. And there are elements of philanthropy in the reform package. I believe Mrs Thatcher certainly, and Mr Baker conceivably, do care about the poor and the weak and neglected people of our inner cities. The contradiction is that it could be imagined that the very same socialist institution which has helped produce the present impasse can be employed to get things back in order. The education systems of the capitalist Far East are not a convincing model for copying. The population here is simply not so biddable. In any case the South Korean and Japanese education systems probably merely “satisfice”. There apparent efficiency may simply be less inefficiency than characterises our system.

In fact contradictions abound, mainly because there has been too much surface thinking, too much fixation on symptoms and no underlying model of what the situation is and of what might be done about it. While education is both compulsory and free at the point of use, power over the curriculum will inevitably rest with one level or other of the practitioner-expertocracy complex.

The counter-factual model which needs considering is the “free enterprise curriculum”. Its great advantage is that it is intellectually contentless - which means not that it will not possess any intellectual content but that its specific components cannot be predicted in advance and *do not need to be*. Unlike specialists I trust people. I think the people will choose a high-standards, highly variegated curriculum. The classics demise, for example, could scarcely have occurred more swiftly under private finance than it has within the *socialist* curriculum. On the other hand if citizens want to study anti-racism or homosexuality: let them; but not with my money. Not many will — with their *own* money!

Because the analysis has been on the surface and predicated on practices variously claimed as noxious or exemplary, policy-making is inevitably confused. The national testing we are going to have is

fair play on the whole: a mild surrogate of the constant, continuous testing a real market would yield. But at 16 plus the testing is to be via the flagrantly egalitarianising and unworkable GCSE. What we have is a combination of things getting better and worse at the same time. The government is inconsistently trying to jack standards up and allowing their levelling down simultaneously.

In terms of declared policy for raising standards and reining back on intellectual tendentiousness, the present package of reforms is badly flawed. What use is a clutch of proposals which mostly moves power around *within* the syndicalist supply nexus? This is one of the perverse outcomes of the discrediting of sociology. A socio-economy of the curriculum is the requisite analytical tool. Criticising the symptoms of disarray leads only to administrative conclusions and proposals. One of the reasons power is being re-distributed amongst educational suppliers is that well-intentioned criticisms of the Hillgate Group kind do have administrative outcomes, being themselves focused on curricular outcomes rather than causes. Hillgate rightly seek to curb the Marxist, CND and homosexualist curriculum that flourishes in *some* quarters.

The result is an extra beat or two of the moral panic heart rate and the passing of power from teachers to civil servants, many of whom are sympathetic to the ideological fads and fancies which were often imposed on teachers and for which they now incur blame. In practice some LEAs demand ideological conformity and I see no evidence that this causes offence at the DES or among the HMI.

In part the old patrician “liberal consensus” persists. The “Malet Street Paradigm”, as that estimable philosopher of education, Terry Moore, has dubbed it, whatever its merits, has certainly fortified the destructive assumption that everybody should have the same discursive, humanist curriculum, whatever his brains or inclinations, his conformity or his rebellion. Thus we find the nonsense of compulsory and truant-provoking lessons in French in the new secondary curriculum. This simply contradicts the principle — broadly speaking reasonable — of making the curriculum more practical for non-high fliers.

What, moreover, does one do with discredited practitioners as the reports begin to rejustify the old practices and discredit the new, as already is happening in English or in Mathematics and Science? What does one do with an HMI who has described one of the few truly successful ILEA secondary schools as “repressive”? When the return to discipline and the battle against the football beasts begins, what shall we do with such overpaid disciples of the early Dr Spock? It is hard to expect those who gave bad counsel to administer the corrective measures. Nikita Khrushchev said that such inconsistencies were like asking a goat to tend the cabbages.

There has, predictably, been spontaneous adjustment by the people most directly affected by the shortcomings of the secondary school: the children. The most glaring contradiction of all, a systemic result rather than an effect of government policy, is that school is popular and its curriculum rejected. Our neglected secondary children have turned the inner city schools into large, day-long publicly funded youth-clubs. This Grange Hill syndrome, as I term it — and the inner city version is far *worse* than the suburban fiction — is full of meaning for policy-makers aware of it. It sends out to those who understand large and unmistakable signals of distress and contempt.

Finally there is one contradiction which government, if not a cause of, could do something to alleviate. The Reform Package — testing, opting out, financial decentralisation, excising corrupted LEAs, tightening primary and secondary links — is *grosso modo* well-intentioned. Given that this is so one is hard put to know why the government is not doing more to increase the intellectual competence of primary teachers. Their competence is perhaps the key variable in the whole process. In many places it is absurdly easy, and getting easier, to obtain a primary B.Ed. Many training institutions are more concerned to teach multi-cultural mishmash than to ensure that trainees are competent in basic English and syntax. Too many students spend an inordinate amount of time painting toilet roll cores or mounting bits of coloured paper on pinboards. The Blue Peter Curriculum I call it. It has little obvious potential for our proposed educational renaissance.