

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF REPRESSION

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EVERY BRAIN IS DIFFERENT

If libertarians were to set up an educational system from scratch, or rather establish a framework within which individuals could best seek to acquire the knowledge, skills, reasoning ability and other aspects of education which they desired, they would recognise that every individual's biological and genetic nature, particularly in relation to the brain, is unique, is markedly and necessarily different from that of every other individual who is living or has ever lived. In the words of Dr K. S. Lashley, one of this century's greatest experts on the brain and the nervous system:

The brain is extremely variable in every character that has been subject to measurement. Its diversities of structure within the species are of the same general character as are the differences between related species or even orders of animals. ... [I]ndividuals start life with brains differing enormously in structure; unlike in number, size, and arrangement of neurons as well as in grosser features. The variations in cells and tracts must have functional significance. It is not conceivable that the interior frontal convolutions of two brains would function in the same way or with equal effectiveness when one contains only half as many cells as the other; that two parietal association areas should be identical in function when the cells of one are mostly minute granules and of the other large pyramids; that the presence of Betz cells in the prefrontal region is without influence on behaviour. Such differences are the rule in the limited material that we have studied.¹

The educational consequences of these biological facts are described by Professor Roger J. Williams as follows:

[T]he wide differences in brain structure contribute to make us all spotted with respect to the ease with which we grasp various thoughts, concepts and ideas. This is why we may speak of someone's having a 'fine legal mind' or of a person's having a 'yen for mathematics' or

of a student being a 'language whiz'. Experts agree that every individual tends to have a pattern of mental abilities or potentialities which is distinctive for him or her alone.²

It is precisely these differences between each unique individual which make a market economy possible. Adam Smith demonstrated that it was the division of labour between individuals who had different aptitudes and skills that led to the creation of wealth in a market economy. The late Professor F. A. Hayek showed that the vast pool of diverse and dispersed knowledge held by millions of individuals, which makes possible the price mechanism along with much else, can never be replicated by any central authority.

It must be stressed that the existence of these inherent differences between individuals is not a justification for the establishment of a system of "elitist" compulsory schooling, of the sort which exists in France, for example, which is based on a hierarchical classification of individuals into "grades" according to their performance in tests imposed by a central authority. Such a system would be just as objectionable from a libertarian point of view as the British "egalitarian" model of schooling. In both models, the content of compulsory schooling is restricted to what the central planners consider to be appropriate. In both models the educational process is seen as a one-dimensional race across an obstacle course, in which most will fall by the wayside in any case. The "prize" for the "winners" of this race is participation in a race across another obstacle course, and so on (in the British case, GCSEs, followed by A levels, followed by university). Both the "elitist" and the "egalitarian" define educational attainment exclusively by performance in the race they compel everybody to participate in; the only disagreement between them is about what handicaps and advantages should be imposed on which participants. By contrast, a libertarian education model would have the participants wandering off the obstacle course in many different directions, according to their own tastes, displaying what the Americans call "the finger" to the indignant "elitist" and "egalitarian" race-marshals furiously blowing their whistles and shouting at their former charges to get back onto the route they have set up for them.

The attitudes of these two supposedly opposed conceptions is reminiscent of the Reverend Edwin Abbott's classic 19th-century humorous story *Flatland*, in which the narrator, the Square, lives in the two-dimensional world of the title. In a dream, he travels to Lineland, a one-dimensional world where the inhabitants are lines of different lengths. The Square tries unsuccessfully to convince the king of Lineland of the existence of two dimensions. He also visits Pointland



Educational Notes No. 19

ISSN 0953-7775 ISBN 1 85637 161 1

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

(no dimensions), a point which considers itself to be the only thing in existence. He is then visited by the Sphere, who shows him the three dimensions of Spaceland. The Square speculates that there may be fourth and other dimensions, but the Sphere immediately dismisses such wild imagining. After the Sphere returns to Spaceland, the Square tells the other inhabitants of Flatland about the existence of three dimensions, and the authorities promptly confined him to a lunatic asylum. The “elitist” and the “egalitarian” alike are Lineland’s staunchest patriots, incapable of imagining the possibility of the mind developing across any more than the one dimension which they believe they can plan, measure and compare. Libertarians, by contrast, would recognise that an individual’s education may develop in any number of different directions, and that a free-market system would almost certainly develop new areas and methods of education which we cannot imagine today. They are Spacelanders who can imagine worlds beyond.

Every individual, being different from every other individual, must become the consumer — and indeed largely the creator — of his or her own unique “educational system”, and select educational services according to his or her own criteria. Any collectivist classifications of “academically capable”, “of average ability”, “educationally challenged” or whatever, would be meaningless in such a consumer-driven system. Any classifications that are to be made in an educational free market will be made by consumers on the competing suppliers of education, and also by independent bodies in order to ascertain their ability to satisfy consumers’ specific requirements.

TOWARDS SELF-OWNERSHIP

But that complex which we call “the mind” consists of more than the brain alone. In a growing child and adolescent, the central nervous system is shaped by the responses the individual makes to external stimuli. The pattern of response an adult makes in a given situation is to a very high degree conditioned by the way in which his or her nervous system has been moulded in youth. The libertarian would therefore seek to ensure that every young person learned and grew as a person in an environment in which the nervous system, and indeed the mind and body as a whole, developed as that of an individual not simply free, in the sense of not being externally constrained in the exercise of his or her natural rights, but more than that: as an individual whose every faculty, every potential, every resource, in every area of mind and body, had been advanced and developed to achieve the maximum degree of that quality which Max Stirner described as *Einheit* (roughly, “self-ownership” or “ownness”), a word for which no exact equivalent exists in English, but which signifies complete mastery by the individual will over every aspect of oneself and one’s relationship with the rest of the universe, and the full power to assert that mastery in all situations and against all forces which would seek to subordinate it.

Socialists, conservatives, contemporary “liberals”, religious people and even many who consider themselves advocates of the free market would doubtless argue that the individual grows up as an integral part of “society”, and that “society” must impose its values (which by a remarkable coincidence always happen to be the personal opinions of the person making this argument) over the individual through the school system. Yet these “social values” are no more than the opinions of certain individuals who have had more in-

fluence than others at some moment in the past. The individual possessed of *Einheit* would assess these values, and others, and choose to either accept or reject them according to his or her own reason and judgement. Such an individual would in all likelihood choose to accept such values as observance of the rights of other individuals, good manners, and respect, where merited, for the status and knowledge of the people conveying learning and skills to the individual, and these values would be greatly strengthened by having been chosen rather than imposed. Such an individual could well, however, reject such “social values” as obedience to coercive authority, subordination of the individual will to that of the collective, and the moral obligation to pay taxes or obey laws which prohibit victimless “crimes”.

The development of the individual in such an environment of liberty and self-ownership, which would permit the nervous system and the mind to grow in a unique manner, is an essential part of the development of a society of genuinely free individuals. Societies characterised by the coercive rule by one set of individuals over others use methods of initiation of young people into society which condition them in such a way as to subject the individual to the values found useful by the rulers. This factor represents a powerful mechanism for social control over the individual throughout his or her life, which can result in remarkable physiological manifestations.

Perhaps the most dramatic of these is the death curses issued by sorcerers in villages in predominantly non-literate societies, which do in many cases result in the death of the victim. In such cases, the sorcerer informs the victim that he has put a curse on him, and then other villagers, with whom he has lived all his life, avoid him and start to refer to him in the past tense, perhaps even holding his funeral, and resent him for still being alive. This results in thanatomania, or a preoccupation with death. The French structural anthropologist Professor Claude Lévi-Strauss describes the consequences as follows:

How are these complex phenomena expressed on the physiological level? Cannon showed that fear, like rage, is associated with a particularly intense activity of the sympathetic nervous system. This activity is ordinarily useful, involving organic modifications which enable the individual to adapt himself to a new situation. But if the individual cannot avail himself of any instinctive or acquired response to an extraordinary situation (or to one which he conceives of as such) the activity of the sympathetic nervous system becomes intensified and disorganized; it may sometimes within a few hours, lead to a decrease in the volume of blood and a concomitant drop in blood pressure, which result in irreparable damage to the circulatory organs. The rejection of food and drink, frequent among patients in the throes of intense anxiety, precipitates this process; dehydration acts as a stimulus to the sympathetic nervous system, and the decrease in blood volume is accentuated by the growing permeability of the capillary vessels. These hypotheses were confirmed by the study of several cases of trauma resulting from bombings, battle shock, and even surgical operations; death results, yet the autopsy reveals no lesions.³

Such manifestations of psychological dependence on what the victim sees as the “collective will” are by no means confined to “primitive” cultures. Since the early decades of this century, the educational theories of the Progressive philos-

opher John Dewey have dominated public (that is, state) schools in the United States. Dewey believed that schooling should reflect the political impulses which were leading to an increased role for the state in American life under the banner of Progressivism and “democratisation”. He believed that the truth could be arrived at “democratically”. In 1915 he argued that:

A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder.⁴

A practical result of the introduction of Dewey’s educational ideas has been to impose on the individual pupil in American schools a strong urge to seek and attain the approval of fellow pupils, to conform to the collective norms of the group and to avoid at all costs to be considered a “loner”, or outsider from that group. The results on the individual of years of schooling under the Dewey system are remarkable.

EXPERIMENTS

In the 1950s, Professor Solomon Asch of the University of Pennsylvania carried out a series of experiments in which groups of seven to nine college students were shown two cards, one of them with a single vertical line, the other with three lines of various lengths. The students were told that this was an experiment in visual perception and that they had to identify the line on the right-hand card which was of equal length to the one on the left. All the students — except one — had in fact been briefed by Professor Asch as to what responses to give; this one student was the subject of the experiment. For the first two sets of cards, all students were in agreement; then in subsequent cards the subject’s answer was different from that of everybody else. The subject, finding his or her perception different from that of other members of the group, was faced with the choice of either continuing with his or her dissent, or agreeing with other members of the group. In the event, 36.8% of the subjects took the latter choice, expressed the same view as the other students, and denied the evidence of their senses. After the experiment, when the subjects were let in on the secret, they reported that during the test they had felt varying degrees of emotional discomfort, from moderate anxiety to feelings of depersonalisation. Even those who had not conformed to collective opinion usually felt this discomfort, and a typical comment was, “To me it seems I’m right, but my reason tells me I’m wrong, because I doubt that so many people could be wrong and I alone right.”⁵

The American school system, in short, succeeds in conditioning in its pupils a psychological dependence on collective opinion that is comparable to that inculcated by small village communities in “primitive” cultures, even if the results are not quite as dramatic. One might expect that if a psychiatrist were able to observe one of the 36.8% of subjects in the above experiment who gave answers which contradicted the evidence of their eyes, without the psychiatrist being able to see or hear the other participants, he or she would conclude that these individuals were in need of psy-

chiatric treatment. Yet in American schools, it is pupils whose behaviour fails to conform to arbitrarily imposed “group norms” who are given classifications such as “hyperactive” and subjected to mind-altering drugs. In a study first published in 1975, Peter Schrag and Diane Divoky showed that over a million children in American state schools were being compulsorily fed amphetamine-type drugs to alter their behaviour patterns. And other methods, too, are used to impose conformity on children. To take a single example, Dr Orlando J. Andy of the University of Mississippi Medical Centre reported that he carried out psychosurgery on more than 30 patients between 1961 and 1974, nearly half of them school pupils who had been labelled “hyperactive” or suffering from “maladjustment”. The operations were performed by drilling holes in the skull, inserting electrodes into certain areas of the brain and burning out parts of the brain tissue. Dr Andy reported “poor” results in one 14-year-old who died three weeks after an operation “due to brain abscesses”. He reported “good” results for a nine-year-old boy who “had seizures and behavioural disorder”. After five separate operations to destroy parts of the brain, Andy reported that “The patient has again become adjusted to his environment and has displayed marked improvement in behaviour and memory. Intellectually, however, the patient is deteriorating.” Andy told a Congressional hearing in 1973 that psychosurgery “should be used in the adolescent and paediatric age group in order to allow the developing brain to mature with as normal a reaction to its environment as possible” and was preferable to “having a child with abnormal behaviour continue under inadequate control during the formative and developmental years of his life”.⁶ Clearly those who believe that the government enforces compulsory school attendance because of a benign concern that young people might not otherwise learn their calculus, periodic table, Shakespeare or our wonderful heritage of individual liberty have not got the entire picture.

Indeed, in Western countries, and particularly in the United States, the school is the central means of political control over the individual. It said that the US is “the freest country in the world”. Certainly it is the only country where freedom of expression is a consistent legal reality, and many Americans (not just libertarians) are astonished when I tell them of the non-coercive activities for which individuals are imprisoned in Britain which are lawful in the United States. However, the mechanisms of coercive political control — compulsory school attendance being the most important — are far more sophisticated in the United States and other Western countries than the crude procedures in force in most parts of the world. In most countries in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, an individual who publishes a newspaper which habitually denounces the government faces a high risk of state interference, while in the United States (though not, of course, in Britain), the individual’s unqualified right to freedom of the press will be scrupulously defended. By contrast, in “Third World” countries, parents who do not send their children to state schools will hardly ever be bothered by the authorities, even where compulsory attendance laws are supposedly in force. In Western countries, however, and particularly the United States, school attendance is taken far more seriously.

In the United States, the practice of forcing young people to attend state schools was introduced in the 19th century quite openly as a means of shaping the attitudes, values and behaviour patterns of young people. The idea was that by putting

the children of immigrants from different parts of the world through one end of the public school, teaching them what the government wanted them to believe, and making them carry out such rituals as saluting the flag and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, they would come out the other end as uniform “Americans”. Needless to say, such a system was a reversal of the principles on which the United States was founded. The spectacle of young people being forced at gunpoint to “pledge allegiance” to a flag which had first been raised in the name of the individual not being forced to do or say anything by the state would have horrified the founding fathers of the United States as a sacrilege against the ideals embodied in the Stars and Stripes. Nonetheless, the public school became the central means by which the American state sought to control its citizens’ thinking and behaviour. Few concessions were made to the idea that knowledge and the adoption of values are the result of the individual’s search for truth: the curriculum openly sought to instil certain ready-made conclusions on students. Under Prohibition, for example, compulsory lessons in “Americanism” told young people that alcohol had been the downfall of ancient civilisations, that the European peoples were in a horribly degraded condition because of drinking, that the fact that American society had liberated itself from this dreadful curse was proof of its superiority, and that it was the duty of every true American to seek out and report “un-American” drinkers. Similarly, the so-called “political correctness” or “multiculturalism” which dominates American schools today serves the political purpose of conditioning young people for a society in which the individual’s membership of an ethnic group, rather than his or her individual actions, abilities and achievements, will be the decisive factor in governing his or her life. For example, the curriculum guide for 11th-grade history in New York state tells students that the Haudenosaunee political system of the Iroquois Indians was the inspiration for both the French Enlightenment and the United States Constitution.⁷

DEATH PENALTY FOR EXERCISING CHOICE

In the 1970s, John Singer, a Christian fundamentalist, removed his children from the local public school in Utah in protest against what he called the “secular humanism” which dominated the school and the curriculum. He built a schoolhouse on his homestead, where his wife Vicki proceeded to teach the children without obtaining prior permission from state officials. The state then obtained court orders forcing the Singer to return their children to its school. Singer refused to comply. Against such an attempt at defiance, the American state knows only one method: maximum force. One day in 1978, Singer walked from his house to collect his mail. He was ambushed by eight policemen, one of whom shot him dead in the back with a shotgun. The officers later claimed that he had attempted to pull a gun on them. Such was the fate of a man who attempted to exercise consumer sovereignty over the schooling he was paying for in “the freest country in the world”.

Supporters of compulsory schooling must accept that, if their system has any credibility, they must ultimately be prepared to kill individuals who defy them. In a libertarian education system, by contrast, no supplier would have any legal power to shoot customers who are unhappy with what he or she has to offer. These libertarians really do have some crazy, way-out ideas, don’t they?

This use of such all-American educational apparatus as shotguns and bullets on human flesh plays little role in improving academic standards. Indeed, by their own standards of centrally-planned knowledge, as measured in comparative international tests of numeracy, literacy and general knowledge, the American state schools consistently achieve the lowest results of any industrialised country, managing the extraordinary achievement of being beaten even by English schools. The real significance of compulsory school attendance, in the United States and elsewhere, is the role it plays in habituating the individual to obedience to coercive authority over a period of many years. Any sergeant-major takes pride in his ability to transform the psychology of raw recruits from that of disparate individuals into that of instinctively obedient members of a collective in 12 weeks of basic training. Imagine the psychological effects of more than a decade of compulsory full-time attendance in schools, and the submission to coercive authority which that entails.

It is for these reasons that libertarians should look with scepticism on the plan by businessman Chris Whittle to set up a chain of private schools throughout the United States modelled on the American public school. Mr Whittle claims that his schools will do the public schools’ job better than they can themselves, for the same amount of money. He wants vouchers schemes introduced so that parents can choose between the local public school and the local Whittle school. One question which has not been answered in the British press coverage of Mr Whittle’s plans is whether he will have the power to shoot unsatisfied customers who attempt to take their business elsewhere, as do the public schools. If so, will he use the US Marshals to carry out this educational work, or will the job be put out to tender to competing private assassination squads, in the same way as McDonalds have won the contract to supply catering for the Whittle schools? Can we expect suppliers’ demonstrations in which Mr Whittle can choose to either take out unsatisfied customers with a rapid-firing laser-sighted automatic rifle, or go back to educational basics by wasting them with the Tommy gun? One hopes that Mr Whittle will neither have nor seek such powers. So why copy the public school model in other areas? Why not develop educational networks in which each young people can gain knowledge of all kinds from individuals outside the school environment?

NOTES

1. Quoted in H. George Resch, “Human Variation and Individuality” in William F. Rickenbacker, ed., *The Twelve Year Sentence*, Dell Publishing, New York, 1974, p. 38.
2. *Ibid*, p. 39.
3. Quoted in Philip Bonewits, *Real Magic* (first published 1971), Sphere Books, London, 1974 edition, p. 128. The article by to which Professor Lévi-Strauss refers is Walter Cannon, “‘Voodoo’ Death”, in the *American Anthropologist*, volume 44, 1942.
4. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, first published 1916, Macmillan, New York, 1964 edition, p. 99.
5. Quoted in Paul Watzlawick, *How Real Is Real?* (first published 1976), Souvenir Press, London, 1983 edition, p. 87.
6. Quoted in Peter Schrag and Diane Divoky, *The Myth of the Hyperactive Child and Other Means of Child Control* (first published 1975), Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1981 edition, pp. 218-9.
7. *Sunday Telegraph*, Review section, 30th August 1992, p. XV.