

COMPULSION VERSUS LIBERTY IN EDUCATION (6):

THE FALSE FREEDOM OF THE BRITISH PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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ASPECTS OF AN EDUCATIONAL FREE MARKET

As I have already related earlier in this series of essays (*Compulsion Versus Liberty in Education (2): The British Road From Freedom to Despotism*, Educational Notes No. 16), the British state nationalised private schools used by the common people in the late 19th century. Had education been permitted to continue free from state control, it is likely that it would have developed so as to break out of the confines of the school and access all the latent educational resources available in the extended market order. The emergence, *en masse*, of psychologically free, independent and self-sufficient individuals would have created enormous problems for politicians and bureaucrats who were constantly expanding their powers by creating various forms of dependence. The structure of the contemporary state, in which the government both takes huge taxes from virtually everyone and hands out subsidies in proportion to the recipient's political influence, and in which the individual has to obtain official approval in order to achieve many of his or her goals, necessitated the construction of a compulsory environment for young people in which they would be conditioned to obey coercive authority and conform not only to the pattern dictated by the state and its employees, but also to the collective will of the individual's fellow prisoners. This is why states everywhere in the Western world either nationalised existing educational facilities, or established state schools and made attendance — at either a state school or “private” one to which the state had franchised its coercive powers — compulsory. And the length of compulsory school attendance has continuously been extended in step with the ever-increasing degree of state control over life outside the school.

In seeking to establish an educational system, libertarians would recognise that an immeasurable pool of varied knowledge exists among millions of individuals, and seek ways to link the individuals who possess a certain kind of knowledge with other individuals who wish to partake of that knowledge, under mutually agreeable terms and conditions. This pool of knowledge includes — to take three examples from thousands — mechanics who know how to fix a car engine, chefs who are expert in French cooking, and antique dealers with knowledge of furniture and ornaments, as well as individuals who know those narrow fields of study which the state has decreed are to be taught in schools: scientists in all fields of research, novelists and literary critics, musical composers and performers, archeolog-

ists, computer programmers, native speakers of foreign languages, and so on, whose knowledge has been acquired through experience in the real world, rather than the second-hand knowledge acquired by schoolteachers assigned with the task of conveying a limited and abstracted version to pupils with the purpose of passing GCSEs.

These exchanges would not be fundamentally different from those of the millions of transactions that occur every day in the marketplace, as consumers obtain the goods and services they require from suppliers according to their individual preferences. In a free society the state would have no role in either the provision of education or in threatening or using violence against anyone who chose not to avail himself or herself of the particular educational services offered by any one supplier. There would be no legal difference between an individual's acquisition of education and the purchases he or she makes on a visit to retail stores. The outlets for education would be at least as varied as the outlets for retail goods. Educational services could be provided by self-employed individuals, commercial companies, workers' co-operatives, voluntary organisations (perhaps with a particular religious or philosophical outlook), and even trade unions and professional associations, although these may have a vested interest in *preventing* the spread of the knowledge of their trades to outsiders. While some of these outlets might describe themselves as “schools”, an individual would be just as unlikely to obtain all his or her education from one outlet as to purchase all his or her retail goods from one shop.

No one group of individuals — the teaching profession — would have any kind of legal monopoly of conveying knowledge and skills. Indeed, in most fields, the more experience the educator has had outside the world of formal schooling, the more valuable will be the teaching he or she provides. Imagine that you want to learn to play a new musical instrument, and have the choice of two instrumentalists from whom to learn it: one who only teaches pupils and never performs or records, the other who spends most of his or her time doing live performances and recordings, and only teaches a few students. All other factors being equal, including price, ability to teach and general personal compatibility, surely most readers would choose the latter musician, who would be constantly learning things about the real world of musical performance which he or she could pass on to his or her students.

WOULD YOU BOARD THIS SHIP?

Imagine that the training centres for people who design ships are all situated at least 50 miles inland, and that none of the lecturers there have ever designed or built any ship, been on any ship, or even seen any ship, in their lives. These lecturers have a legal monopoly of teaching people how to design ships, and no student is permitted to study with a practising nautical engineer. The state imposes on these colleges a curriculum which contains nothing about ships, their design or construction, except perhaps what the student may be able to glean in physics about the displacement of liquid by moving objects. If any student plays truant from the college, visit a harbour and examines or boards a ship, he or she will be breaking the law, and both the student and the skipper of the vessel who permitted the student aboard would be liable to arrest and prosecution. However, companies manufacturing equipment and parts for designing and building sea vessels flood the colleges with promotional material, catalogues and brochures, and from their reading of this material, the lecturers — in breaks between their lessons — tell students how to design and build sea vessels. The day after they leave these colleges, every student begins designing and building ships on which real people travel through real seas. How would the reader feel about boarding such a vessel for a voyage across the Atlantic Ocean in mid-winter, with the weather forecast being for severe storms throughout the journey?

This is exactly how young people are prepared for adult life in British schools. The content of the curriculum is almost completely irrelevant for adult life, and the fact that school is uni-directional, compulsory, predictable and automatic makes it a complete negation of the way the adult world works. In order for young people to be able to achieve success and happiness in the adult world — and frankly this boils down predominantly to financial success — the people who convey knowledge and skills to young people should mainly themselves be actively involved in the real world, and also that young people should be free to gain the widest possible variety of experience of different areas of the adult world, by learning skills and methods directly and at first hand. Such learning processes would necessarily be different for every person, according to his or her abilities and interests, and would recognise that success means rapidly adapting to bad and unpredictable times, as well good and predictable ones. It does not mean simply academic learning about success in a classroom, although this may well play a role.

In an educational free market, everybody, regardless of paper qualifications, would have the right to be both a supplier and a consumer of knowledge and skills of every kind. Young people — and adults too — would be able to learn from electronic engineers, fashion designers, computer programmers, nurses, bankers, athletes, second-hand car dealers, archaeologists, interior decorators, insurance assessors, pharmacists, chefs, helicopter pilots, building society managers, plumbers, stockbrokers, philosophers, accountants, salesmen, self-made entrepreneurs, conjurers, graphic designers, lorry drivers, advertising copywriters, scientists, painters, private detectives, theatrical directors, mountaineers, car mechanics, solicitors, Classical scholars, translators, market traders, journalists, farmers, footballers, taxi drivers, shopkeepers and individuals from a thousand other professions, in most cases actually at the premises where

these people work. With the abolition of schools as we know them today, and the bureaucracies that control them, money now paid in tax for education would be handed back to families, either in the form of cash or vouchers or a combination of both, and young people could then use these to obtain education from individuals and organisations of their choice. Companies, training organisations and individuals worth their salt would respond to this opportunity to make money by offering customers training in the way skills and knowledge are used in the real world, combined with actual experience of using them in a real life environment.

It is worth noting in this respect that the Education Department bureaucrats who wrote the 1861 report of the Newcastle Commission condemned the private schools which catered for working-class and lower-middle-class pupils for employing teachers who had *too much* experience of the world outside schools, many of them combining teaching with other professions. An assistant commissioner named Cumin complained that:

Of the private school masters in Devonport one had been a blacksmith and afterwards an exciseman, another was a journeyman tanner, a third a clerk in a solicitor's office, a fourth (who was very successful in preparing lads for the competitive examination in the dockyards) keeps an evening school and works as a dockyard labourer, a fifth was a seaman, and others had been engaged in other callings.¹

And a Dr Hodgson discovered to his regret

grocers, linen drapers, tailors, attorneys, painters, German, Polish and Italian refugees, bakers, widows or daughters of clergymen, barristers, surgeons, housekeepers and dressmakers as being found among the teachers of private schools.²

THE PARENT-CHILD NEXUS

The fact that many consumers in an educational free market would be young people living with their parents would no more alter the nature of that market than it alters the nature of the market for retail goods. Every human being, regardless of his or her age, is inherently a free individual, possessing self-ownership and the right not to be aggressed against by anybody else. Nonetheless, because children are under the care of, and materially and financially dependent upon, their parents, an implicit contract exists between them which gives the parents considerable influence over the choices made by children. When families go shopping, go out to eat or go on holiday, the parents and children work out between them their requirements as consumers. The kids can eat a triple ice cream sundae so long as they eat up all their greens first. When on holiday, they can go to Euro-Disney for the day as long as they also visit the Palace of Versailles. By no stretch of the imagination can or should the state have any role whatsoever in making or influencing these decisions.

This parent-child nexus would be free to choose which among these suppliers it considered to be most appropriate for each field of education, and would be free to change suppliers without notice if their choice proved unsatisfactory. But parents — let alone the state — would have no legal right to compel a young person to attend any educational facility against his or her wishes. In a free-market educational system, by definition, every individual con-

sumer, of whatever age, would at all times enjoy complete freedom to stand up and walk out of the door of any supplier's premises, without explanation and without asking permission from anybody. The supplier of education would have no more power to call the police or truant officers to force that individual back than a private shopkeeper, hotelier, restaurateur or theatre manager can call the police to force back customers who are unsatisfied with what he or she has to offer, and who have voted with their feet. Quite apart from the more important considerations based on individual rights, this process of the individual actually choosing appropriate educational suppliers and rejecting inappropriate ones would itself be an invaluable educational experience. It would also enable suppliers to accurately assess the size and nature of the markets for different educational programmes, and the relative efficacy of different educational techniques, and adjust their services accordingly.

Defenders of the present system may object that education is such a complicated thing that consumers are incapable of making rational choices about it, except within narrow parameters permitted them within the school curriculum. In making this argument they condemn themselves out of their own mouths. If compulsory school attendance for 11 or more years is the best way of preparing young people for adult life, then surely parents, who have all been through the same system, should be ideally suited to making sensible choices about their own children's education. If they are not, and bureaucrats have to impose coercion in order to prevent the choices these parents would otherwise have made, then the school system through which these parents were processed must be disastrous in its educational effects. Even if it were true — which libertarians would dispute — that education is an extraordinarily complex subject, comprehensible only to professionals who have spent years studying it, this would not justify the state owning virtually all the educational resources and imposing one particular system on everybody under threat of violence. Consumers in an educational free market may choose to consult independent advisers who could assess various suppliers and make recommendations for a "tailor-made" education for a particular young person. Consumers would have complete freedom to either accept or reject these recommendations, and to dispense with the services of an adviser they found unsatisfactory, in the same way that they may choose to consult a stockbroker, accountant or other adviser about investments and finance, and sack him or her at will. In addition, an educational free market would see the appearance of consumer guides to educational suppliers, just as *Which?* magazine provides consumers with information and recommendations on competing suppliers within every field from unit trusts to DIY equipment and car parts, and the Michelin and Egon Ronay guides classify restaurants and hotels throughout the world. Both of these have a fearsome reputation for the insistence on continuous high standards — which are regularly checked by anonymous visits — from the establishments they include.

The fact that the world of finance and investments is relatively complicated is no justification for nationalising it and compelling investors by law to put all their money in state financial institutions, where it is invested in a portfolio decided upon by bureaucratic fiat. If the state ran investments with financial performance similar to the educational results it achieves in schools, there would be an uprising through-

out the country. This is perhaps a measure of the difference in value people in Britain place on money compared to education.

SCHOOLS VERSUS PUBLIC LIBRARIES

It is instructive to compare the state-owned school system as established in Britain in the late 19th century with that other state-owned educational resource: the public libraries. In a public library the individual exercises virtually complete consumer sovereignty. Anybody, regardless of age or academic qualifications, can use its resources for his or her own purposes, which may be literary, scholarly, commercial, for entertainment or any other determined by the user, who can stay for as long or short a time as he or she wishes, and is free to leave at any time without asking permission from anybody. The task of the library staff is to assist users in obtaining information for the user's purposes, and not to impose upon him or her any goals of their own. Nobody is under any obligation to go near the library if they so wish, and individuals who do enter are not told which books, periodicals, records, videos and so on they must read or borrow. Any suggestion that every individual should be forced by law to visit a public library and there obliged to read certain books under the supervision of the staff, who then subject the user to examinations on what they have read, with the results of those examinations determining a large part of the future course of the individual's life, would be futile and absurd, besides being a monstrous violation of individual freedom. One can easily imagine surly, rebellious adults, forced to attend the library to study a list of tomes decided upon by some committee of librarians, disrupting the entire process and bringing the system to virtual collapse. And this is, of course, exactly the way the "education" of young people is run in the schools.

Now the public library system would be greatly improved and expanded by privatisation. A free market in libraries would in all likelihood be a varied system in which individuals might, for example, pay a subscription for a year's membership of a private library, or become joint owners of a co-operative library. It would allow the development of specialised libraries containing, for example, technical books, law books, art books, or books in a particular foreign language. Even today, the private London Library, which charges users a modest subscription (with reductions for students, pensioners and the unemployed), is reputed to be the best in the capital, despite the competition of local taxpayer-financed "free" public libraries. But the point is that whether it is owned by the state or privately, a public library exists for the self-chosen purposes of the individuals who visit it, and not to forcibly impose any curriculum upon them.

Conversely, the fact that an establishment is privately owned rather than nationalised does not necessarily mean that what occurs within it is in accordance with the principles of individual liberty. The significant question is not whether an educational facility is privately-owned or nationalised, but whether the individual who attends that facility is free or enslaved. The slave plantations of the American South before the Civil War, and other countries, were privately owned. If any slave attempted to escape from a plantation, he or she would be handed straight back to the plantation owner if caught by the authorities. Anybody who helped a slave to escape would be breaking the law and

subject to punishment. The privately-owned plantations were dependent on the state for their continued ability to violate the rights of the individuals within them.

Similarly, almost all the existing “private” schools — or “public schools”, as they are called — in Britain operate a regime of collectivism, actual and threatened violence and denial of the individual liberty of the pupils within them. Private enterprise provides everything more efficiently than the state, and the same is true of coercion and the destruction of individual freedom, where the state has franchised its powers of inflicting violence to a private institution. The legal status of an individual in one of these “private” schools is similar to that of a slave in a Southern plantation. The legal position is that the private school stands *in loco parentis* of the young person within it, and has the same powers over the young person as his or her actual parents. Any individual who tries to exercise consumer sovereignty by running away from a British “private” school and who is intercepted by the police is neither arrested, nor charged with any offence, nor given the right to either call a solicitor or to put his or her case in a court of law. The individual is simply driven back to the school when caught by the police, regardless of his or her wishes. Compare this with the situation of a young person accused of murder, who has all these rights, and is presumed innocent until proved guilty. The claim by the Tories that these schools are a manifestation of individual liberty and independence from state control is a lie of colossal proportions. At least the defenders of slavery in the ante-bellum American South never sank to these depths of hypocrisy. So much disinformation about the public schools and their role in British society has been spread by the Tories that an extended discussion of Britain’s own “peculiar institution” is in order.

UNSPEAKABLY CRUEL PLACES

The English public schools which we know today have a completely different historical origin and function from the private day schools used by working-class and lower-middle-class children which were characterised by voluntary attendance and which the government nationalised in the late 19th century.³ (The term “public schools” in England generally means those private schools that are members of the Head Masters’ Conference, although the private schools outside HMC are not fundamentally different from those within; the term “independent schools” signifies all English schools not owned by the state. In Scotland — and the United States — “public schools” are state schools. For the purpose of the following discussion, “public school” means any privately-owned school in Britain run on the lines of Eton and Harrow.) From the foundation of King’s School, Canterbury, by St Augustine in 597, the public schools had the function of training choristers and Latinists for the medieval church. As the centuries went on, a significant proportion of wealthy British parents — initially the peerage and the landed gentry — began to send their sons, and later daughters, to board at these schools, principally, it seems, as a means of avoiding the responsibilities of parenthood. Boys would be sent away to preparatory (“prep”) schools from the age of seven, then go to the public schools proper at the age of 12. Distaste for children, including one’s own, is a uniquely British phenomenon, and nowhere else in the world do large numbers of rich parents deprive their offspring of the educational and psychologically healthy and necessary experiences of family and voluntary

social life by paying good money for them to sit on toilet seats to warm them for bigger children.

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, the public schools were riotous, chaotic, violent and unspeakably cruel places; the masters ruled by means of continuous beatings inflicted with ferocious brutality and a formidable range of weapons, quite often resulting in the maiming or death of the victim. Mass bullying, which was ignored or even encouraged by the same masters, involved acts of torture and occasionally murder, a number of which were discussed in Parliament and *The Times*. Under the system of fagging, older boys treated younger ones as their personal slaves, and “re-warded” them for their forced labour with the infliction of physical violence. A man who had been a fag at Eton in 1824, for instance, recalled that:

The practice of fagging had become an organised system of brutality, and cruelty. I was frequently kept up until one or two o’clock in the morning, waiting on my masters at upper and indulging every sort of bullying at their hands. I have been beaten on my palms with the back of a brush, or struck on both sides of my face because I had not closed the shutter near my master’s bed tight enough or because in making his bed I had left the seam of the lower sheet uppermost.⁴

During this period, mass uprisings by the boys, which spread to local towns, were so violent and destructive that the militia were called out to suppress them on several occasions. In his excellent history of the public schools, Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy showed that the public school regime derived from a combination of the doctrines of Christianity and a peculiarly British lack of concern on the part of wealthy parents:

Children were the fruit of original sin, they were defective adults whose sin was to be beaten out of them. And it followed that, until this had happened, they were scarce company for adults. Parents on the whole didn’t seem to care what treatment they received provided they kept out of the way. This is another explanation of the huge stretch of time they spent away from home, even when roads began to improve. (It also explains why in the 18th and early 19th centuries running away was the worst crime. Sexual offences are scarcely mentioned.)⁴

The attitudes of such parents should be compared with those of working-class and lower-middle class parents of the 19th century. Professor West’s studies have shown such “common” parents taking an active part in choosing the best possible education for their children, for example shopping around for the best teachers. It is highly significant which group of parents had “parental choice” removed from them and replaced by bureaucratic control.

In the period between roughly 1820 and 1860, the public schools were transformed into equally harsh and violent, but now highly organised and brutally disciplined regimes which sought to condition every aspect of the life, attitudes and behaviour of the inmates in a collectivist direction. The house system was established, and a rigid and finely graded hierarchy among the boys, with different powers and privileges designated by slight gradations in a complicated system of uniforms. Each school developed its own unique argot, the definitions of which gives an insight into the reality of everyday life within the schools. Slang within a particular social group emerges to describe phenomena which

the ordinary language does not adequately describe. Just as the Eskimos have many words which correspond to the English “snow”, so too the fine gradations of oppression within the public schools have led to new words within each institution. For example, new boys at Winchester are still forced to memorise — and be tested on — a printed list of some 120 official “notions”, or slang words, including the following:

Brock	(n) an act of cruelty or unfairness (vb) to tease; to bully; to treat unfairly
Junior	an inferior liable to be sweated
Oil up	ingratiate yourself
Sweat	(n) 1. Fagging 2. Hard work (vb) To fag
Toll abs	to run away from the school. ⁶

The despotic power of older boys over younger ones was formalised under the prefect and house captain systems, and backed with the authority of headmasters, and behind them the state. In these schools, the individual was — and is — subjected to a regime of collectivism, actual and threatened violence and denial of individual rights which exceeds that of any regime in the world outside penal institutions. Everyday life in North Korea is a holiday of unlimited freedom compared to the regime imposed on the individual in British public schools. The obsessive, detailed rules governing every detail of the individual’s life at every moment of night and day, and the ferocious punishments for actual or alleged infraction of those rules; the enormous proportion of the pupil’s time committed to compulsory games (proficiency at which is a key to advancement within the school); the brutality of mass, officially condoned bullying; the coercive “egalitarianism”; the horrific and sometimes fatal initiation rituals (inflicting multiple burns on boys’ hands with a red-hot stick from the fireplace at Winchester, for instance); the denial of all individual rights, including property rights and freedom of expression; the removal of the protection of the rule of law and due process; arbitrary and mass punishments, including the authorised beating of boys by older boys as well as masters; and the need for the individual to grovel to his “superiors” in order to obtain the slightest privilege or favour, which can then be removed on a whim — all these and other factors are designed to shape the growing and developing individual into a being whose actions, behaviour, reflexes and attitudes are characterised by a psychological dependence on the collective and a hostility towards freedom and individualism, and in whom every trace of non-conformity and resistance to coercive authority has been stamped out. Harold Nicolson wrote about his time at Wellington:

My whole energy during the terms that followed was concentrated on achieving uniformity. ... One ceased so completely to be an individual, to have any but a corporate identity, one was just a name, or rather a number, on the list.⁷

These schools inculcated among their inmates attitudes of intense social snobbery. For a long time, many refused to accept boys whose fathers had made their money through providing goods and services people were willing to pay

for. In 1847, for example, the secretary of Cheltenham College wrote:

Had we admitted tradesmen in any instance, we must have done so almost without limit, and in the confined circle of shops in Cheltenham we should have had the sons of gentlemen shaking hands with schoolfellows behind the counter.⁸

The sons of Cheltenham shopkeepers could count themselves fortunate in their exclusion. As time went on, however, sons — and daughters — of tradesmen were gradually admitted, although strictly on condition that they be moulded into the public school pattern. As a result, public school attitudes contaminated the private sector, as inmates entered adult life. Gathorne-Hardy explains:

Public schools initiated adolescents into a world of trivial rules. ... And — in addition to canalising competitiveness and ensuring discipline — because progress up the public school hierarchical ladder was in many cases automatic, it taught all its pupils their places in the social hierarchy: at the top. They were expected to lead. This was quite explicit. When Dr. Vaughan [headmaster of Harrow] replied to Palmerstone, who had expressed doubts about the fagging system, he explained that it was not just a method of keeping discipline, but also of “inculcating a system of organised rank” and was therefore essential as a “memento of monitorial authority”. Every headmaster would have agreed.⁹

The public schools inculcated an attitude of contempt for any academic, scientific, industrial or commercial activity and for any form of “useful” learning: the curriculum was dominated by Latin and Greek, albeit atrociously taught. A Royal Commission in 1864 found that the typical boy leaving public school knew neither Greek nor Latin, and was “ignorant also of geography and of the history of his own country, unacquainted with any modern language but his own and hardly competent to write English correctly”.¹⁰ The aim instead was “character-building”, with the intention to produce “men fit to rule” other individuals, not to trade with them. The public school system directly attacked all the values which had made Britain great: individual liberty and a recognition of the value and dignity of the individual; entrepreneurship and commercial success; technology, science and invention; and limitations on state power.

Probably the vilest aspect of the public schools is that they encourage younger pupils to submit to being treated as slaves and objects of sadism by older pupils by promising that in a few years’ time they will be able to act in a similar manner, not to their current oppressors, but to younger boys or girls whom they will then control. The “reward” for being an abject slave is the chance to be a vicious overseer over other slaves in a few years’ time. A ten-year-old prep school boy told Bertrand Russell, “The bigs hit me, so I hit the smalls; that’s fair.”¹¹ Far from being “independent”, the regime within the public schools is completely dependent for its continued existence on state power. Every 15-year-old despot (or 10-year-old in the case of prep schools) who exercises the power of life and death — in some cases literally — over younger pupils has the full backing of the state behind him (or her). Every cruelty and injustice he (or she) inflicts on a whim has the law of the land behind it, and would never be tolerated for one minute if the victim had the elementary protection of the rule of

law. The same Conservatives who argue that young people are too “irresponsible” to be allowed to choose their own education from a variety of sources, and must therefore be compelled to attend a school to be taught a curriculum decided by the state, never object to young — and presumably equally “irresponsible” — sadists having despotic powers over other young people in the Tories’ own Gulag archipelago.

PUBLIC SCHOOL BRUTALITY

The atmosphere of continuous physical assaults on selected individuals means that the individual cannot abstain from the process of bullying: either he joins in the assaults or himself becomes a victim. Gathorne-Hardy’s account of the case of Cyril Connolly, who was horrifically bullied as a new boy at Eton, gives an insight into the manner in which power is exercised in these establishments:

Cyril Connolly found that the little boy in charge of chamber could beat him with a rubber tube. Chamber Pop could beat him. Practically everyone seemed able to beat him — and did. ... [A]fter two terms two things happened to him. He was given a “Chamber Pop beating”, then a boy called Maynell, relenting, had a heart-to-heart: “Ugly, why are you so filthy, what’s the matter with you?” After crying, Connolly made him laugh. So he discovered the power of laughter. This enabled him to join the bullies and for a year he bullied.¹²

(“Pop” is the Eton Society, the supposed “elite of the elite” within the school, whose powers over the lives of inferior Etonians are almost literally unrestricted.)

Time and again one encounters the syndrome of individuals who have been horribly oppressed themselves become oppressors in the same way. The large majority of child abusers were themselves subjected to sexual abuse as children. These terrible facts only strengthen the resolve of libertarians to establish a moral order in which every individual enjoys freedom, inviolable rights and self-ownership from birth onwards, and both recognises the same values in others, and the evil of initiating aggression against others and of accepting subjugation to aggression. The destruction of coercive institutions, such as the British public schools, which deliberately encourage oppressive attitudes among young people must be regarded as a high priority for libertarians.

The girls’ schools, fewer in number and appearing somewhat later, had the function of producing future wives of the products of the boys’ schools. The regimes there were less violent, but provided equal opportunities in that they were just as restrictive, conformist, coercively “egalitarian”, snobbish and menticial as the boys’ schools. Antonia White describes the following incident from an English convent school in 1914:

At first I used to curl up in bed for warmth as I did at home but I was cured of this evil habit by an old French nun. “Supposing my child,” she said gently, “that you died in the night. Would that be a becoming posture in which to meet our dear Lord?” And she taught me to lie on my back “like a Christian” with my feet thrust well down into the cold sheets and my hands crossed on my chest.¹³

And Gathorne-Hardy records that:

At Cheltenham Ladies’ College in the 1950s there was a parade of all 800 or so girls (many eighteen) in mid-winter in front of the headmistress. Rank after rank in turn had to lift their skirts to make sure they were all wearing green knickers, about which there had been some laxness at the time.¹⁴

This regime has nothing to do with academic learning. On the contrary, the main purpose of the public schools is openly to “build character”, to “make a man” of each boy within them (or the equivalent in girls’ schools). This means an individual who can both exercise coercive power over others without any regard for the latter’s rights or consent, and also obey that power without question if imposed upon him. It means an individual psychologically linked to and dependent on the collective who conforms without question in every area of life, and suppresses independent thoughts and actions. According to Gathorne-Hardy:

A uniform does what it says — makes one form; it de-personalises you, making you easier to control and also stamping you with the image of the institution. ... The more closed the group, the greater the conformity; as the public schools became ever more self-concentrated, so the pressure became stronger ... By the end of the [19th] century it was a perfectly explicit aim of the public schools to turn out a type, a socially conforming unit; most schoolmasters (not all), and then prefects, found individuality horrifying. ... The most powerful element forcing uniformity in a group is the group itself, not the staff in charge of it.¹⁵

Sir Peter Ustinov’s report at Westminster in 1939 sums up the public school ethos in one sentence: “He shows great originality, which must be curbed at all costs.”¹⁶ The regime inculcated within these institutions has produced more permanent psychological and physical harm, and more oppression and misery of young people, than the entire British state school system put together. In state schools the regime comes to an end at four o’clock, and does not exist at weekends, when the individual can enjoy some measure of individual freedom and voluntary social relations. In public schools, by contrast, the tyranny continues morning, noon and night, seven days a week, without remission.

When the public school system is successful in shaping the inmate in the desired pattern — which thankfully is by no means always — it creates a conditioned reflex of hostility towards everybody who has not been through a public school. Harold Nicolson, for instance, stated quite openly, “I hate the lower classes”, and wrote that:

I am conscious ... of a marked distaste for those who have not benefited by a public school education. This distaste is based on no superficial prejudice; it is founded on experience. People who have not endured the restrictive shaping of an English school are apt in after life to be egocentric, formless and inconsiderate. These are irritating faults. They are inclined, also, to show off. This objectionable form of vanity is in its turn destructive of the more creative forms of intelligence.¹⁷

THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE RISE OF THE STATE

During the second half of the 19th century, the public school’s wider purpose became to produce state administrators with a common collectivist *esprit de corp* for ruling

both the British Empire and the rapidly expanding bureaucracy at home. This remains their political role today. The combination of cruelty and despotism exercised by older boys over younger ones within the public schools created the most horrendous attitudes towards the way in which power ought to be exercised by state officials when these same boys left school and entered the civil service, politics and the judiciary. The relatively individualistic and socially egalitarian Australians and Canadians treated this new breed of arrogant, swaggering Pom bureaucrats with derision, unlike those areas of the Empire ruled more openly by the birch, the carbine and the artillery unit. In the late 19th century, H. B. Gray wrote:

The English boy, as he emerges from the crucible of the public school laboratory, is generally a more conspicuous failure — especially at first — in these new and partially discovered Continents [Australia and Canada] than he has proved himself to be a conspicuous success in dealing with lower or more submissive races in the wilds of Africa or in the plains of India.¹⁸

Gathorne-Hardy shows that many public school boys

were enraged by their treatment when small, took their revenge later on their own fags and, gaining a taste for proud order-giving, still fuelled by inner resentment, continued to exercise it for the rest of their lives on the lower classes with that particular arrogance and conceit which was quite often a characteristic of upper class behaviour.¹⁹

As such people consolidated their monopoly on the highest echelons of the growing civil service and government in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, these attitudes were carried over into the creation and execution of policy. The dominant principle of British government became that the large majority of the population were not fit to run their own lives, and that the public school men should control and order them, while systematically robbing them to pay for it. The public schools reshaped the country in their own image, which is unsurprising when one considers that virtually all the senior civil servants and permanent secretaries who have actually run government policy over the past century and more, and most Cabinet ministers, have been public school men who, on the evidence of the policies they have introduced, see the individual in British society as having no more right to life, liberty and property than the humblest fag at Eton. Not only are the public schools not independent of the state, they have very largely created the British state as we know it today.

When, as we saw above, the civil servants nationalised the private voluntary schools which catered for the working class and lower middle class in the later 19th century, they made not the slightest move to interfere with the public schools. The devil looks after his own. When at the beginning of this century the state established compulsory secondary schooling for the lower orders, the secondary modern and grammar schools it established were based largely on the public schools, with the significant difference that these new schools inculcated a subservient and deferential attitude among the inmates, whose future lives were to be run by the minority who had been bred to lead. The state's Borstals and approved schools, too, were based on the public schools, with houses, prefects, "character-building", games and son on. Young people throughout the social hier-

archy were thus conditioned to look up to the public schools, as demonstrated by the deluge of public school stories read by children of all classes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Gathorne-Hardy says that

the entire education system in England was what you might call public school-lineal. This fact alone is virtually enough to explain (and demonstrate) the complete acceptance of the class structure and the domination in it of public school leaders, values and ideals. By 1900-1914 (and into the 1930s) the ethos had sunk right down through the culture, from top to bottom.²⁰

These developments led to a social revolution — or rather deep reaction — throughout British life. In the 18th century, although Britain was a very hierarchical society, every individual had a value in his or her own right, regardless of rank. Dr Samuel Johnson wrote,

The Englishman ... was born without a master; and looks not on any man, however dignified by lace or titles, as deriving from nature any claims to his respect or inheriting any qualities superior to his own.²¹

It was to these traditions that the American colonists appealed, albeit without satisfactory result, in the early stages of their dispute with the British Crown.

This changed fundamentally with the supremacy of the public school system and its values in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The assumption took hold that the wealthy and powerful minority who had been "bred to rule" through the public schools were a fundamentally superior group with the right to control — through the state — every detail of the lives of the inferior majority. As Gathorne-Hardy puts it,

It is the fact that during the later 19th and early 20th centuries English class consciousness in some respects and among a good number of people came much closer to what we today call racism that made it so odious.²²

Economic policy increasingly became run on the basis of unwritten "understandings" — with the force of law — between ministers, permanent secretaries and heads of large companies and City institutions, all of them public school men: the beginnings of the corporate state. When the "welfare state" was founded, it was quite openly operated on the basis of the civil servants taking money from the common people in return for running their lives for them: from the 1900s to the 1950s no mention was made of "equality", "redistribution of wealth" or of working-class individuals having any significant say over how the state ran their lives. Their only contribution was to be fleeced by the taxman as never before. Their leisure activities, too, became controlled almost as tightly as those of public school inmates. To take a single example of film censorship, a film with Mongolian dialogue was once submitted to the British Board of Film Censors, which demanded a full translation before granting a certificate, although there was then not a single person in Britain who understood Mongolian. And this in a country which, through such figures as Milton, Locke and Mill, had been considered to have invented the concept of freedom of expression.

"THE GENTLEMAN IN WHITEHALL"

These attitudes were adopted by the Labour Party as much as by the Conservatives, the party most closely associated

with the public schools. The idea of a small ruling minority controlling the lives of the passive majority was exactly what the Fabian socialists who came to dominate the Labour Party favoured. During the second world war, the socialist Professor Harold Laski (who sent his sons to public school) spoke of the “pride every citizen of this country is bound to have in the amazing heroism and endurance of the common people”.²³ Note the distinction between “citizen” and “common people”. Indeed, in its consistent defence of the control by ex-public school permanent secretaries over the lives of working-class people, Labour has repeatedly proved itself to be *plus royaliste que le roi*. Until the late 1970s, for example, trans-Atlantic air travel was governed by a conventional public school “understanding” between Department of Transport civil servants, the Civil Aviation Authority and the heads of nationalised and private airlines, which dictated which airline could travel which route, and what they were to charge. These prices were set several times over the market level (for example, well over £1000 for a return ticket to the US, in 1970s money), and guaranteed large profits to the airlines, while restricting trans-Atlantic to government officials, large companies and the wealthiest individuals. Freddie Laker (now Sir Freddie) then set up a commercial airline offering return tickets across the Atlantic for a fraction of the “legal” price, putting them for the first time in the reach of millions of working-class families. Unsurprisingly, the Labour government took the side of the public-school arrangement which guaranteed high profits for the established airlines, and supported the lawsuits against Sir Freddie that eventually drove Laker Airlines into bankruptcy.

“The gentleman in Whitehall really does know best.” The assumption in these words of Douglas Jay, Labour Cabinet minister in the 1940s, was that because the gentleman in Whitehall had been to a public school, his control over the lives of everybody else was inherently justified. These words demonstrate both the triumph of the public school ethos and the Fellaheen mentality to which it led among the majority of British people. Gathorne-Hardy, writing in 1977, in words which are even more relevant today than they were then, explains:

There was a huge reserve of acceptance, of that deference ... which could astonish foreigners and which castrated the working classes. ... The schools perpetuated this by remaining the accepted avenue by which to rise in class and power. A revealing demonstration of this is the enormous success and sale of self-help and self-educate books in America during the 1930s and their relative failure among the lower middle and working classes here. The point is that in the US the idea was that you could better yourself; in England it was your children who would rise, not you; and the way they would rise would be through school. ... There is something immature, for all its age, in a country in which the vast proportion of the people expect to be led. Maturity is leading yourself. Certainly, relaxing in the confidence that the lite would lead them out of it, the British people have been cushioned from, indeed ignored, the gathering reality of the last thirty years.²⁴

Compare the failure of these self-help books in the 1930s with the mass sales of such books as Samuel Smiles’s *Self-Help* in the 19th century, before the public schools had con-

solidated their strangle-hold on the mentality of the British people.

“PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE INDEFENSIBLE”

Although one beneficial trend of the past 30 years has been the decline of the public school domination over British society, sadly the Public School State, in which the few control the lives of the many, has been considerably strengthened in the same period. Today the public schools are complaining loudly about falling enrolments. The journalist Claudia FitzHerbert, herself an ex-public school inmate, argues that they are essentially a financial swindle perpetrated on parents, just as Dickens described Wackford Squeers’ Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*:

I am surely not alone in finding myself unable to sympathise with the plight of parents who can no longer voluntarily afford to rid themselves of their offspring for the best part of a year in the obviously spurious name of education.

Nor do I have any sympathy for the snivelling proprietors of these establishments who appear to think that they should be protected from the ebb and flow of the capitalist market — which has, in the past, enabled their customers to afford their ridiculous fees in the first place — and refuse to consider what everyone else is forced to do when times are hard and reduce their prices.

The cost of boarding schools is indeed a deeply mysterious business. They are famously cold and unpleasant places, where you are given very little to eat and nothing to drink and the teachers are paid a pittance and the dormitories are overcrowded — yet most of them find it necessary to charge several thousand pounds a term per hungry, cold and squashed child.²⁵

Her case is strengthened by the fact that several public schools invented fake “medieval rituals” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to make parents think they were buying into something ancient and therefore worth spending a lot of money on.

From any humane, let alone libertarian, viewpoint, the psychological effects of the public school regime are the equivalent of a butcher using his cleaver to do the work of a heart surgeon. For those who wish to see the development of every individual as a free, psychologically healthy and independent human being, every one of whose unique faculties and potentials have been developed to their maximum, aware of and capable of exercising his or her rights, and respecting the rights of every other individual, the public schools of this country are an abomination. It is true that some public school apologists argue that these places are not the brutal tyrannies they once were. David Jewell, headmaster of Haileybury, for instance, has recently claimed that

Not so long ago, conformity and manliness and toughness were the virtues that we celebrated. Now we value nonconformity and independence of thought and try to teach young men that real manhood involves tolerance, not aggression.²⁶

The writer A. N. Wilson, himself public-school “educated” and a regular speaker at these places, replies:

Public schools are indefensible. ... [S]eparating young children from their parents is a dereliction of parental

responsibility. Perhaps there is a case, when children enter their late teens, for their going away from home. But this is very different from separating boys from their mothers at the age of seven (as happened to me and thousands of other screwed-up middle-class men). No one can avoid being scarred for life by such separation, but it does seem gratuitous for the parents and teachers to conspire to create these scars. ... The difference between an old public school and one of the new ones might be the difference between Parkhurst and an open prison. But both are still prison-houses of the soul. Teachers might try to be caring, responsible individuals instead of the pederasts and sado-maniacs who used to swell the ranks of their profession. It does not stop the idea of boarding schools being grotesque and cruel.

In any event, I would not entirely believe the headmasters when they claim that public schools are such very benign places. In one school I visited recently, an outbreak of anti-Semitism had become so violent that the Jewish boys had been compelled to take refuge in the chaplain's house.²⁶

It is true, also, that several public schools were set up with the express intention of avoiding the worst excesses of the traditional schools, and the existence of the private sector of schooling at least makes possible the lawful development of educational facilities which have a less oppressive character than either the state schools or the conventional public schools. Nonetheless, the power structure within the supposedly "progressive" public schools — and the legal status of young people within them — is no different from that of those at Eton and Winchester: a slave is still a slave whether dressed in top hat and tails or in civvies. To take a single example, Bedales has always been co-educational, has avoided such classic public school features as uniforms, fagging and corporal punishment, has fewer petty rules and forced rituals, and supposedly less harsh discipline than most public schools. Indeed, it has a reputation for turning a blind eye to sexual relations between pupils. Yet here, too, teachers and certain favoured pupils have arbitrary powers over the individual pupil, who is forced to attend lessons and other rituals, and has no legal power to either walk off the premises or to sue or prosecute, in a regular court of law, persons within the school who initiate aggression against him or her. In this context, the so-called "sexual freedom" of Bedales becomes sexual intimidation. Amanda Craig explains:

I would sooner die than send my unborn child to a co-educational boarding school. I went to Bedales, the first of such institutions in England, and it has taken the catharsis of writing a novel to get over the damage it did.

To all the well documented forms of public-school bullying was added a sexual element. Girls were given marks out of 10 for looks: boys assumed it was their right to pick and choose whom to "go" with. At 12, the equation between sex and power was made explicit to me when I was assaulted by three boys.

On punching one of them into a holly bush to escape, I became a "reject" — someone whom it was fair game to taunt, ostracise or, in the case of an older girl in my dormitory, sexually abuse.

The combination of peer-pressure and hormones made it very difficult to concentrate on work. Girls were so ob-

essed with their looks that one or two in every year (out of 25) were anorexic, and petty theft of clothes was rife.²⁸

SUMMERHILL: A NOBLE FAILURE

Even Summerhill, founded in 1924 by A. S. Neill as a more libertarian alternative to conventional public schools, must be judged a noble failure for the same reasons. Neill was motivated by the genuinely libertarian cause of creating a school in which young people were free to choose all their educational activities. Not only were there no uniforms, corporal punishment and petty rules, but attendance at lessons, and everything else, was entirely voluntary, and no pupil was authorised to exercise coercive power over any other pupil. The school was supposedly run "democratically", in that every one in Summerhill, from Neill himself to the youngest pupil, had a single equal vote on how the school was to be run. In reality, this meant that the school's power structure was divided between the mob or "majority" rule, and Neill's property rights as owner of the place. As headmaster, Neill actively took steps to prevent bullying and intimidation among pupils. Nonetheless, the pupils' legal status remained the same: it was only an illusion of freedom and self-ownership that was maintained by what was in practice Neill's benevolent despotism over the school. The "freedom" enjoyed by pupils was completely dependent on Neill's power over them, and his good will and affection towards them, which fortunately for them was in abundant supply. Gathorne-Hardy describes one manifestation of this:

Neill noticed that at Summerhill every new entrant had to endure three months' unconscious hatred from all the other pupils. They were jealous of this person with whom they had to share the approval of Neill and other hero figures. They therefore regressed to the equivalent family situation where the new baby is hated for having the mother's love. The initiation ceremonies were ritualistic to express (and so dissolve) those feelings and contain them. The institution also seems to feel the need to impress its power and authority (whether this be official or unofficial) on the newcomer.²⁹

After Neill's death, the reality of the situation became ever clearer. A recent television documentary about the school showed an institution in which the lives of the pupils are run on the basis of mob rule, with gangs of pupils bullying and extorting from other pupils. The staff simply fail to uphold the rights of individuals within the school, and that is not freedom. Freedom means that the individual's rights derive from the individual himself or herself, and not from another individual or an institution. It means that the individual has the power to effectively assert and enforce those rights as an individual. The current status of young people within British "private" schools embodies neither of these legal principles, and this exposes the inherent limitations of attempts to create libertarian educational alternatives using the British "private" school model.

THE ONLY QUESTION IS HOW TO ABOLISH THESE PLACES

The libertarian who is true to his or her own principles can adopt one position, and one only, with regard to the British public schools in general: they must be put to the torch and the sword, and every trace of their influence must be wiped off the face of the earth. And it is not enough that the

schools themselves should go: Albion shall never be free until the psychological impact of the public school regime has been thoroughly cleansed from the minds of the British people. We need the righteous zeal of a Wilberforce or a Garrison to wreak destruction upon these institutions, and the fact that they are privately owned no more excuses their tyranny than did the fact that the slave ships and slave plantations were privately owned spare them the wrath of the enemies of chattel slavery. The only question is how to abolish these places while preserving at all times the essential values of individual liberty and private property rights. An answer to this question is given by Lysander Spooner, the 19th-century American anarcho-capitalist and — which is to say the same thing — opponent of slavery in the Southern states. Spooner, a practising lawyer, argued that the US courts should simply enforce the rights of slaves as if they were those of free individuals. They should have full legal power to simply walk off the plantations at will, and any attempt by the plantation owners to forcibly prevent them from doing so should result in the criminal prosecution of the owners for kidnapping and assault, as well as any civil suit the ex-slave may seek to enter for compensation, damages and payment for years of forced labour.

Spoooner's method would be ideal for use within the public schools. In Britain at present, persons under the age of 18 are legally prohibited from bringing either civil action at law or private criminal proceedings against individuals who have initiated aggression against them. Also, any boy or girl who runs away from a "private" school will be handed back to the school authorities by the police if he or she is caught, regardless of his or her wishes, and the school authorities are then legally empowered to inflict whatever punishment on the individual for attempting to leave that they see fit. These young people are, in other words, slaves. The public schools must be brought within the rule of law. The individual incarcerated in a public school — or indeed state school — should have full legal power to walk out of the school the moment he or she feels like it, and any attempt by school personnel to force him or her back should result in criminal prosecution against them for kidnapping and assault. Having left the school, the individual must also have full legal power to press criminal charges in a court of law against any pupil or member of staff who has initiated aggression against him or her within the school, regardless of whether this was carried out under the auspices of "legitimate authority" or as "unofficial" bullying. The individual may also choose to take civil action at law against both those individuals and the school as a body for financial compensation and, where appropriate, punitive damages. Just as private companies — and also now trade unions — are financially liable in a court of law for aggressions carried out by their employees or members in the course of the company's or union's work, so too should both "private" and state schools be legally liable to pay the full financial penalty for the violations of human rights carried out by either paid staff or pupils within the schools.

Such is the regime within these schools is that these legal changes would result, first, in an immediate mass exodus of highly unsatisfied consumers walking off the premises, and, second, a flood of civil lawsuits and criminal prosecutions against teachers and pupils who had violated inmates' rights, and suits against the schools themselves. The combined settlements would in all likelihood be so enormous that the schools would be forced into bankruptcy. Possibly

some of the less oppressive private schools would be able to adapt to the new legal order with sufficient speed to be able to continue to attract customers, treat those customers with sufficient respect for their rights as to avoid lawsuits and prosecutions, and play a part in an educational free market for young people who would have the legal power to vote with their feet. But the traditional public schools and their imitators would be destroyed for ever.

Indeed, a short-lived campaign within the public schools, similar to that carried out by American abolitionists against the slave plantations, occurred in 1934, when Esmond Romilly, aged 15, ran away from Wellington to London and started publishing a radical magazine called *Out of Bounds*. The first edition (of three) explained:

Out of Bounds is against Reaction, Militarism and Fascism in public schools. We attack not only the vast machinery of propaganda which forms the basis of the public school system, and makes them so useful in a vicious and obsolete form of society; we oppose not only the semi-compulsory nature of the OTC and the hypocritical bluff about "character-building". We oppose every one of the absurd restrictions and petty rules and regulations which would be more applicable to a kindergarten than to boys between the ages of fourteen and nineteen.³⁰

(Maria Montessori would certainly have disagreed with this last sentence!)

Public schoolboys from all over Britain wrote in to join the campaign and became agents for distributing *Out of Bounds*. The public schools responded with the same willingness to debate of the 19th-century slave owners: boys caught distributing the paper were severely punished and often expelled; when Romilly went to public schools to spread the word he was set upon by uniformed cadets, and once thrown into a river by prefects acting under a headmaster's instructions.

If, however, any individuals actually wish to sample the public school regime, it is likely that some entrepreneur would reopen one or two of the bankrupted public schools as theme parks, in which tourists could don top hat and tails, be assaulted by actors dressed as prefects or masters, and generally undergo the public school experience. But this simulation would no more be the real thing that Marie Antoinette experienced the life of a French peasant when she dressed up as a shepherdess in her fake village; like her, the visitors would be free to leave their fantasy world at any time. The same option was available neither to French peasants suffering under the economic restrictions of the Bourbon state, nor to the real public school pupils who would be handed back by the police if they attempted to leave.

NOTES

1. Quoted in E. G. West, *Education and the State*, (first published 1965), Institute of Economic Affairs, London, 1970, p. 167.
2. Ibid.
3. See David Botsford, *Compulsion Versus Liberty in Education (2): The British Road From Freedom to Despotism*, Education Notes No. 16, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1993.
4. Quoted in Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *The Public School Phenomenon, 597-1977*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1977, p. 61.
5. Ibid, p. 39.
6. Ibid, p. 443.
7. Quoted in *ibid*, pp. 94, 113.
8. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 125.
9. Ibid, p. 120.
10. Ibid, p. 143.
11. Ibid, p. 42.
12. Ibid, p. 119.
13. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 246.
14. Ibid, p. 394.
15. Ibid, p. 113.
16. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 303.
17. Quoted in *ibid*, pp. 22-6.
18. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 195.
19. Ibid, pp. 120-1.
20. Ibid, p. 221.
21. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 126.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid, p. 353.
24. Ibid.
25. *Daily Telegraph*, 6 November 1992, p. 21.
26. Quoted in *Evening Standard*, 4 November 1992, p. 10.
27. Ibid.
28. *Daily Telegraph*, 15 October 1992, p. 8.
29. Gathorne-Hardy, *op cit*, p. 123.
30. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 305.