COMPULSION VERSUS LIBERTY IN EDUCATION (8):

THE THIRD WAVE

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The appearance of compulsory state schooling systems followed the economic, political and demographic changes which occurred in the 18th and 19th centuries throughout the Western world. The thesis advanced by the American "futurist" Alvin Toffler helps to explain the nature of today's schools, the reason why they are collapsing, and the sort of education which will replace them in the future.

Toffler divides history into three great "waves". The First Wave was the establishment of agriculture, and the social, economic and technological forms which derived from that. The Second Wave was the industrial revolution, and was characterised by such features as dependence on primary energy sources, the division between producer and consumer, the appearance of mass markets for standardised goods, large-scale concentrated technology and industrial resources, the ever-increasing division of labour, and mass hierarchical institutions such as the large incorporated company, the factory, the postal system, trade unions, political parties and "democracy", the unified national state and the mass media. In a Second Wave society, a typical individual would be born into a "traditional" nuclear family, spend twelve or fourteen years in a compulsory school, then perhaps three or four in university or training college, then go to work as the employee of a large company or the state doing a specialised and standardised job, have one marriage partner and two or three children, and enjoy job security until retirement. People bought standardised consumer products, read mass-circulation newspapers, drove standardised cars, watched nationally-broadcast television and voted for one of two or three large political parties.

THE SECOND WAVE AGAINST THE THIRD WAVE

The Third Wave first appeared in about 1955, and has been characterised by the appearance of decentralised technologies, such as electronics and micro-computing, and the fragmentation of both mass institutions and Second Wave patterns of life. The division of labour becomes somewhat less rigid, goods are produced in short runs for specialised markets, new technology and industries operate on a smaller scale, and mass organisations disintegrate and become less hierarchical. Rising divorce and illegitimacy rates challenge the traditional family, traditional industries decline and are replaced by small-scale high-technology concerns, companies decentralise their structures and contract out many of their functions to specialist outsiders, and through micro-computers, modems and fax machines, the home becomes the "electronic cottage" in which many functions previously confined to the office or factory can be carried out. Individuals have access to video, cable and satellite television and hundreds of publications, and in politics countless small pressure groups become more important than mass parties. Life becomes more individualised, more fragmented and less secure and predictable: the Third Wave brings new problems and challenges as well as opportunities. The following passage from Toffler gives some idea of the differences between the Second and Third Waves:

> The hidden code of Second Wave society encouraged a steam-roller standardization of many things — from values, weights, distances, sizes, time, and currencies to products and prices. Second Wave

Educational Notes No. 22

ISSN 0953-7775 ISBN 1 85637 164 6

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance, 25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
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businessmen worked hard to make every widget identical, and some still do.

Today's savviest businessmen ... know how to customize (as opposed to standardize) at lowest cost, and find ingenious ways of applying the latest technology to the individualization of products and services. In employment the number of workers doing identical work grows smaller and smaller as the variety of occupations increases. Wages and fringe benefits begin to vary more from worker to worker. Workers themselves become more different from one another, and since they (and we) are also consumers, the differences immediately translate into the marketplace.

The shift away from traditional mass production thus is accompanied by a parallel de-massification of marketing, merchandising, and of consumption. ... Post-standardized production brings with it post-standardized consumption.

Even prices, standardized during the Second Wave period, begin to be less standard now, since custom products require custom pricing. ...

In politics we see similar trends. Our views are increasingly non-standard as consensus breaks down in nation after nation and thousands of 'issue groups' spring up, each fighting for its own narrow, often temporary, set of goals. In turn, the culture itself is increasingly de-standardized. ...

The de-massification of the mass media — the rise of mini-magazines, newsletters, and small scale, often Xeroxed, communications along with the coming of cable, cassette and computers - shatters the standardized image of the world propagated by Second Wave communications technologies, and pumps a diversity of images, symbols, and values into society. Not only are we using customized products, we are using diverse symbols to customize our view of the world. ...

The net effect is to carry us away from the Huxleyan or Orwellian society of faceless, de-individualized humanoids that a simple extension of Second Wave tendencies would suggest and, instead, towards a profusion of lifestyles and more highly individualized personalities. We are watching the rise of a 'post-standardized mind' and a 'post-standardized public'.

This will bring its own social, psychological, and philosophical problems, some of which we are already feeling in the loneliness and social isolation around us, but these are dramatically different from the problems of mass conformity that exercised us during the industrial age. ...

[T]here are movements aimed at literally turning back the clock — like the back-to-basics movement in United States schools. Legitimately outraged by the disaster in mass education, it does not recognize that a de-massified society calls for new educational strategies, but seeks instead to restore and enforce Second Wave uniformity in the schools.[1]

The schools we know today in the Western world are classic Second Wave institutions, and are rapidly breaking up under the impact of the Third Wave. The attempt to force millions of young people into mass collective institutions, their minds to be processed as uniformly as the Ford Model T car, is utterly futile in a Third Wave society. This futility is recognised by young people more than by teachers or politicians: on any given day in Greater London, 30% of pupils are playing truant, with average daily attendance in some London schools less than 50%. The threat of violence by truancy officers and juvenile courts against themselves and their parents is not enough to convince many young people to undergo the grotesque farce inherited from 19th-century Second Wave statist views of education and society.

THE NEED FOR AN EDUCATIONAL FREE MARKET

In the Third Wave economy which is being constructed, large companies will no longer take on hordes of raw school- and college-leavers, mould them into company men and women, and train them to do specific jobs which they will continue to perform until the day they retire. On the contrary, companies are sacking employees wholesale (regardless of length of service), drastically reducing their intake of trainees, and cutting costs by contracting out as many functions as possible to outside companies and highly skilled self-employed individuals for cash. Companies are paying substantial fees for highly specialised knowledge and experience, which they use for a specific period and a specific project; they are no longer offering jobs for life. The dividing line between the job interview between candidate and employer and the sales pitch between supplier and customer is blurring rapidly. Firms now expect their suppliers-cum-employees to come fully-formed, like Athena from the head of Zeus. The problem of the Second Wave school system of today is that by confining young people to schools it prevents them from acquiring the type of knowledge that people are willing to pay money for — knowledge that can never be taught in any book or any classroom.

An educational free market must enable young people to acquire — directly and without intervening institutions — precisely this type of knowledge, along with specific high-paying skills, which of such high value in a Third Wave economy, and also psychologically and financially prepare them to succeed in this unpredictable, but potentially highly rewarding, commercial world, in which the individual will have to be constantly aware of, and able to satisfy, the requirements of a changing market. This means that young people must have the right to choose to actually work in the

real-world environments where this knowledge can be acquired, as a fundamental and necessary part of their education. Once forced school attendance is abolished, and financial resources allocated for education taken from the state and handed back to the individual consumer, either as cash or vouchers, a new market in educating young people would develop. Companies, associations and individuals would establish schemes in which young people will have the opportunity to gain this direct knowledge and experience, in conjunction with formal training in techniques by the firm's staff or the individual supplier. Consumers would pay for this in the form of either cash or vouchers which could be exchanged for cash. One can envisage young people trying out many different enterprises in the course of their education, and choosing as a career the one they have enjoyed most. For such a system to come into existence, not only must the compulsory school attendance laws disappear, but also laws prohibiting young people from gaining such experience. Toffler argues that young people will best be able to gain work experience within the "electronic cottage" into which homes will be transformed in the Third Wave:

> Second Wave restrictions on child labour — originally well-intentioned and necessary, but now largely an anachronistic device to keep young people out of the crowded job market — become more difficult to enforce in the home setting. Certain forms of work, indeed, might be specifically designed for youngsters and even integrated with their education. (Anyone who underestimates the capacity of even very young people to understand and cope with sophisticated work has not run into the fourteen- or fifteen-year-old boys who serve, probably illegally, as 'salesmen' in California computer stores. I have had kids with braces still on their teeth explain the intricacies of home computing to me.)
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> The alienation of youth today flows in large measure from being forced to accept a nonproductive role in society during an endlessly prolonged adolescence. ...
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> In fact, integrating young people to work in the electronic cottage may offer the only real solution to the problems of high youth unemployment. This problem will grow increasingly explosive in many countries in the years ahead, with all the attendant evils of juvenile crime, violence, and psychological immiseration, and cannot be solved within the framework of a Second Wave economy except by totalitarian means — drafting young people, for example, for war or forced service. The electronic cottage opens an alternative way to bring youth back into socially and economically productive roles, and we may see, before long, political campaigns for, rather than against, child labour, along with struggles over the necessary measures to protect them against gross economic exploitation.[2]

The other day a computer recruitment consultancy called me and asked if I knew anybody with experience of programming Apple Macintosh computers using a relational database called Fourth Dimension. The consultant told me that his client was seeking someone to work on a contract for several months, and that the programmer would be paid £7,000 a month. The consultant had scoured the country for an experienced and available individual, without success, and offered me an introduction fee if I could recommend anyone. Unfortunately, I was unable to help him. He told me he was going to contact agencies abroad to try and find someone who could be flown in to do the work.

Now as I write, this country is undergoing a severe economic recession, one result of which is a catastrophic employment situation for young people being released from schools and universities. Hundreds of thousands of young people entering the real world after 11, 13 or 16 years of full-time schooling find what they have learned in that time to be totally valueless in that world. A recent newspaper item reports that a job cleaning the lavatories in an East End pub for £3 an hour attracted no less than 150 applicants, of whom 50 were university graduates. Meanwhile, they cannot find anyone with any experience of Fourth Dimension for love nor money, and a job paying seven grand a month is going begging. In many other fields, particularly technical ones, there is a similar acute shortage of people with the precise experience for which firms are willing to pay good money. The solution to the tragedy of state-imposed youth unemployment is to allow young people currently confined in schools to gain this experience in the commercial environments where it can be obtained, and enable them to make the big bucks as soon as they have mastered the skills which they can sell.

In this new economic and technological pattern, the pattern of compulsory schooling in which the individual is forced into a passive role, taught a collective curriculum in a single institution, taught by people who know only the compulsory school environment, will guarantee most of its released inmates a one- way ticket to the dole office, or at best low-paid and menial jobs, regardless of who administers it.

Needless to say, the Conservative government's policy is to try and make the dying system more rigidly uniform than ever before, with the introduction of the National Curriculum, and the further concentration of power in the hands of one central planner. We saw above how John Patten, Education Secretary, has, for example, made Shakespeare compulsory for all 14-year-olds. Let us therefore appeal to him in the words of the Earl of Kent in the final scene of *King Lear*:

> Vex not his ghost: O! let him pass; he hates him
> That would upon the rack of this tough world
> Stretch him out longer.[3]

THE ASSAULT ON THE MONOLITH

From the early 19th century until the late 20th century, the compulsory school enjoyed unquestioning support by the virtually all political parties and governments in virtually all countries. Under every type of regime, the expansion of compulsory schooling was seen as the means to national wealth, and "going to school" became ever more exclusively the means by which the individual could gain advancement and success — or fall to failure and marginalisation. Opposition to this system was confined to a tiny handful of perceptive thinkers who had hardly any influence on the general acceptance of the ever-growing Leviathan of the compulsory school. With the onset of the Third Wave, however, a series of powerful challenges to Second Wave school systems burst to the surface throughout the Western world.

In the 1960s, writers throughout the Western world, from a variety of ideological viewpoints, published radical critiques of the coercive nature of the regime within schools, of the concept of compulsory schooling and its effects on society. Writers broadly associated with sections of the "New Left", such as the American Paul Goodman, attacked the way in which the compulsory school system was orientated around the values of wealthy and powerful groups within society, and how it restricted opportunities for success, privilege and influence to the better off, whose lengthy educations were paid for by the poor through taxation. They demanded new forms of education within which young people of all backgrounds could enjoy liberty and autonomy, and freedom to learn a far wider range of skills and knowledge than that laid down in the school curriculum. John Holt, an American schoolteacher who became disillusioned with the school system, wrote over a dozen books which penetratingly exposed what compulsory schooling does to the young. He became the principal figure in the American home education movement, showing how parents educating their children at home could do a far better job than teachers in the public schools, and provided them with materials to effect this. Partly as a result of Holt's work, 1.5 million American families are educating their children at home, with educational results which leave the schools dead in the water.

Nor were these critiques confined to the writings of academics and ideologues. In many countries, radical teachers, parents, and young people alike demonstrated their dissatisfaction with what the state offered by setting up educational alternatives on their own initiative, in the form of free schools, open schools, little schools and other developments.

Within the confines of the traditional schools, too, young people began demanding change. *The Little Red Schoolbook*, which attacked the repressive regime of schools and encouraged young people to organise a revolution in favour of personal freedom, became a best-seller in many countries in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was banned in France and Italy and only permitted to be published in Britain in a censored edition. The book was written by two Danish Maoists, who were presumably attempting to gain the support of young people for their cause by holding out the promise of greater individual liberty, in the same way that the Maoists in China — before attaining political power — had promised to make every peasant into a private owner of land. But the fact that the book sold so well demonstrated the extent of dissatisfaction among young people in schools throughout the Western world.

Young people set up organisations which campaigned for radical changes to the regimes within school. In the 1970s, for example, pupils in Britain set up the National Union of School Students, which campaigned for the abolition of corporal punishment, uniforms, petty rules and compulsory physical education, and for democratic control of the schools by the pupils. To achieve its goals, the NUSS organised mass strikes of pupils within schools, distributed pamphlets with titles like *How to Disrupt Your School in Five Easy Lessons*, and published a combative newspaper called *Blot.* In my school days, I was a shop steward with the NUSS, recruited a large number of members, and attempted to organise a strike in defence of a popular teacher who had been sacked from the "private" school I attended. Our union, which began as a spontaneous organisation of young people, originally had an office at the premises of the National Union of Students. However, following a media smear campaign against the NUSS, spearheaded by the *News of the World*, the NUS, under pressure from the Labour Party, expelled our organisation from its premises, and we found a home through the good offices of the Polytechnic of Central London students' union. The NUSS was then infiltrated and taken over by the Socialist Workers' Party, much to the dismay of moderate, responsible trade unionists such as myself, and this created conflicts which led to the disintegration of the union in 1981. In those days, I believed that it was possible to improve the school system by democratisation. Since I became convinced of the case for both libertarianism and deschooling, I now recognise that this was dangerous reformism which detracts from the necessary struggle for the abolition of compulsory schooling and its replacement by an educational free market, as an integral part of the reconstruction of society on a capitalist basis.

NOTES

1. Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*, (1980), Pan Books, London, 1981 edition, pp. 265, 267.
2. Ibid, p. 230.
3. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in Collected Works, Murrays, London, 1973 edition, p. 915.