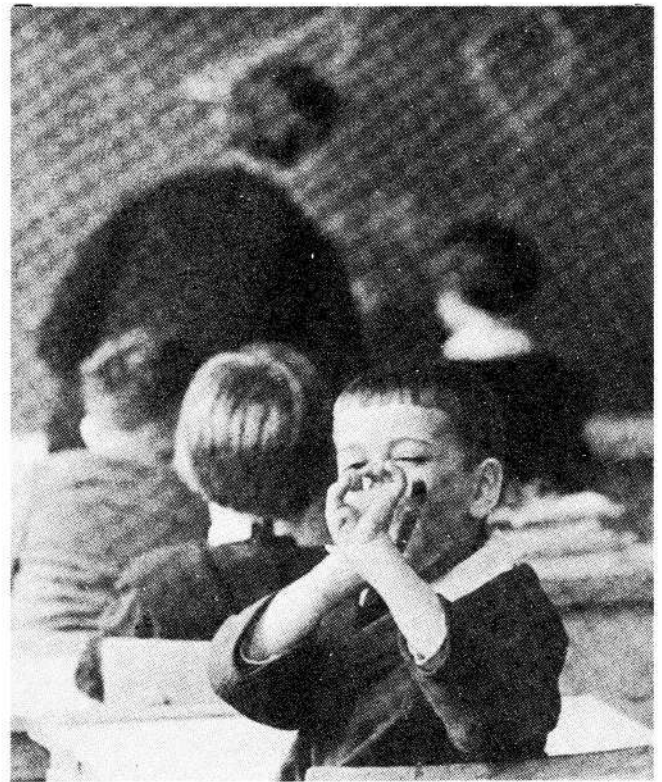


SCHOOLING FOR CAPITALISM

by M. Murphy



Student radical?

Recently a number of radical¹ critiques have been published which deal specifically with the societal model on which South Africa is based – I am thinking in particular of Rick Turner's "The Eye of the Needle" and the Report of the Spro-cas Economics Commission. It seems evident to me that any serious thought about Education must be preceded by precisely this kind of critique of society, whatever its conclusions may be. For any educator who has no considered aim in his lessons, or whose aim is limited to the immediate imparting of some particular item or items of knowledge, or whose aim extends to only such things as "a good matric" or "producing a good citizen" is more than likely a very convenient agent for someone else in authority who *has* made a more radical analysis than his own. An educator, like a citizen *cannot*, whether he wants to or not, take a non-political rôle. The citizen who is silent and "gets on with his own affairs" and is "not interested in politics" is acutally plumping his weight right behind the status quo, whatever it is. The teacher who is "a mathematician not a politician" effectively hands himself over to the people who plan educational policy to do with as they wish. In short, every educator is educating *for something*, and it is up to him to analyse what he *wants* to educate for in as broad and radical a perspective as possible. Otherwise he may in all innocence, be hoping to do good but in actual fact be doing the opposite.

The chapter on Education in "The Eye of the Needle" frequently quotes Ivan Illich and in this article I intend using his book "Deschooling Society" as a starting point in looking at some aspects of educational practice in South Africa.

Illich's criticism of schools is radical to the extent that he proposes completely abolishing them (where schools are defined as "the age-specific, teacher-related process requiring full-time attendance at an obligatory curriculum") He maintains that schooling is not synonymous with learning, that in actual fact most people learn more *out* of school than in it, even in rich countries where people spend a very high proportion of their lives attending school. But much worse than this, school is not simply an institution which does not promote learning as well as it should do, it actually

teaches the *wrong* things. It is at this level of criticism that Illich's broader critique of society becomes evident. He has no particular academic interest in education as such (God forbid that anyone should). His concern is how educational institutions relate to the society which is fundamentally affected, for better or for worse, by their character. He analyses human society, as it appears to him and seeks the causes of its defects. As human beings we can pass on either good or bad to our descendants and Illich applies the results of his critique of society to what is probably society's most "vulnerable" or influenceable point, the actual "passing on" point, education.

MANIPULATES

For Illich a *bad* human society is one which manipulates people, and of all human institutions, Illich sees schools (apart from asylums) as the most manipulative. What is more, schools prepare people for further and lifelong manipulation by other institutions. "School" says Illich, "is the womb of the consumer society".

1. I use "radical" in its etymological and normal dictionary sense, not in the sense in which the Government uses the word "Communist".

How does school manipulate people?

Firstly, school is compulsory for people of a certain age. Whether they wish to learn what the school offers, whether they are ready for it, whether they are interested or not is immaterial. Children between certain ages are obliged to go to school. Truant officers hunt down the disobedient.

Once they are at school they become conditioned to the axiom that learning is the result of teaching, (which is implied in the idea of compulsory schooling anyway). **It takes until the fourth or fifth year of university's somewhat different atmosphere (in some departments) for the student to grasp that since he has learned to love, to feel, to speak, to politic and to play without a formal teacher he can also learn maths or biology without lectures. Of course it is good that no one finds this out too soon. What would become of the teaching profession?**

The concept of childhood which is behind this kind of manipulation implies that human beings of a particular age have no maturity, no rights, and no innate curiosity. This is socially and psychologically indefensible.

But, if one assumes this concept of childhood it is a logical second step not only that they should be busy being taught for x years of their life, but that the teachers should plot out *what* they should be taught. This is not wrong only because some children ("difficult children") are obliged to take subjects for their matric for which they are not suited. If this were all that was wrong, an extension of the American "options unlimited" would almost solve the problem. No, the point is that learning should never be dissociated from interest or the desire to learn, and interest simply cannot be channeled into seven subjects (starting at point A and proceeding to position B) no matter how wide and varied the choice. Human beings simply do not think along the same sequences of thought. It is as natural for me to follow up a first lesson about the symbols a and b as used in algebra by enquiring about the culture of the Middle East or about metaphors in literature, as the syllabus setters presume it to be to add a and b together or subtract them from each other. The American system, offering a host of options, avoids this point also. I might opt to take a course in pottery, but there is no valid reason (apart from the sacrosanct syllabus) why I should not find the potter's wheel's mechanism more interesting and lay my clay aside until I have investigated to my satisfaction.

INFLEXIBLE

Schools are obviously too inflexible to offer an answer to these problems and Illich proposes what he calls "Learning Webs" as a substitute. It is only fair to point out that Illich's highly original proposals are *examples of the sort* of institution that would replace schools, *not* detailed blueprints in 349 carefully graded steps. Illich's "Learning Webs" would be flexible, free and open to all who are willing to share what they already know with those who desire to learn it. The four networks involved would be: (Deschooling Society, pp. 78, 79)

- (1) Reference Services to Educational Objects – which facilitate access to things or processes used for formal learning. Some of these things can be reserved for this purpose, stored in libraries, rental agencies, laboratories, and showrooms like museums and theatres; others can be in daily use in factories, airports, or on farms, but made available to students as apprentices or on off-hours.

- (2) Skill Exchanges – which permit persons to list their skills, the conditions under which they are willing to serve as models for others who want to learn these skills, and the addresses at which they can be reached.
- (3) Peer-Matching – communications network which permits persons to describe the learning activity in which they wish to engage in the hope of finding a partner for the inquiry.
- (4) Reference Services to Educators-at-Large – who can be listed in a directory giving the addresses and self-descriptions of professionals, paraprofessionals, and free-lancers, along with conditions of access to their services. Such educators, as we will see, could be chosen by polling or consulting their former clients."

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

What Illich is proposing is the logical continuation of the fact that we learn more things out of school than in it. He proposes creating a "learning environment", where the emphasis would be on sharing, or what Illich calls "conviviality", the exact opposite of manipulation. Illich's critique of the schools springs from a critique of the quality of human society, and the proposals he makes with regard to schools and to education are designed to remedy the failings of society in general. Unquestionably, the immediate implementation of his suggestions would demand an immediate change of heart among people in authority. This is very unlikely and Illich is obviously not expecting this. What he does hope for, and this is surely legitimate, is that some kind of lobby for institutional educational change along these lines can be established. **To dismiss Illich, as one of his critics¹ has done, by stating that "Man is never short of lofty aims, he merely can never decide on principles of implementation" is to avoid the point with an indecorum hinting strongly at the right wing defence mechanisms all too familiar in South Africa.** One may not shy off moral imperatives because one has not been supplied gratis with a closely detailed map of how to achieve them. The *real* nub of the "moral problem" is most often not the lack of "principles of implementation" but a lack of *willingness* on the part of individuals to take moral imperatives seriously. This has the very disturbing corollary that although I cannot change society immediately, I change myself and start working towards the "vision of the good".

How does Illich's critique of society/schools apply in a South African context?

I have purposely not referred, in my summary of some of Illich's main points, to his economic arguments – that expenditure on schools has no natural ceiling – and his remarks about the immorality of spending, for example on each of the U.S.'s graduate students an amount five times greater than the median life income of half of humanity. Nor, in the following section, do I intend concentrating on the gross discrepancies between the amount spent on white education per capita and the amount spent on black education per capita. What I propose to consider is how it comes about that such intolerable discrepancies are tolerable to the vast majority of white people in this country. In other words, I attempt to link up some of the failings in our society with the manipulatory character of even our best-financed schools.

1. Philip J. Foster: Comparative Education Review, October 1971: p 274

TEACHER

Let us look, firstly, at the rôle of the teacher in the average White South African school. The teacher is far more than an instructor. He also has the duty of being moral guard, physical guard — the teacher who sends the pupil who is unwilling to work out of the classroom usually has to explain this action to the headmaster — moral judge, jury and executioner. For any person who has such far reaching powers of interference over another person to treat the other person as a person requires something of a minor miracle. Apart from these onerous duties the teacher is also expected to "get his class through the exam". A high failure rate in his class is *his* responsibility. The effects of this on the average well-intentioned teacher are disastrous. He very soon has to crush all sensitivity towards pupils' boredom and unwillingness to tackle work for which they have little spontaneous interest. He becomes perforce an authoritarian and disciplinary figure. What is worse, the pupils come to expect this kind of attitude from teachers. A teacher is either a good disciplinarian or a bad one, and if he is a bad one he will soon suffer the brunt of the frustrations of his pupils who cannot relate to him as a person. This basically repressive situation is accepted, by and large, because it "achieves results", material results, in the form of matric certificates.

Is it stretching a parallel too far to compare this master pupil relationship with the master servant relationship between whites and blacks in South Africa? , a master

servant relationship which is justified on the grounds that it is in the blacks' own interest — "Look what we've done for them! "?

STRUCTURE

Since Marshall Macluhan we can no longer ignore the importance of *how* one learns as an influence on *what* one learns. No matter how "liberal" the principles taught by any particular teacher, if these lessons are given in terms of the I-tell-you-, you-listen-and-accept authority structure, the chances are that the pupils will imbibe the structures rather than the content. Nor do "discussions" which are really "guess-what-teacher-is- thinking" sessions change this situation.

Reinforcing and underlying this authoritarian pupil/teacher relationship, is the curricular system in use in South African schools. The Adults know best. The best thing for the children is Maths, Science, English, Afrikaans, History and Biology. This will equip them to fit in well to our society. There's a choice available too, for those who are so awkward as to be different — one can do a third language instead of a Science, or Geography instead of History. The almost complete stifling of personal preference and spontaneous interest which these structures impose on an individual can be directly related to the kind of manipulative advertising that abounds in every public place: "Fill up with B.P. Super Enerjet — Five different octanes to choose from. B.P. has just the right octane rating for *Your* car". Illich's remarks



Daumiers "Teachers and Small Fry".

suddenly come alive: "School shapes the progressive consumer. School is the womb of the consumer society". The uncritical acceptance of the actions of both local, provincial and government authorities can obviously also be directly traced to the authority structure in schools. Being constantly told what you have to do, having all your work programmed for you produces a kind of psychological impotence, a diffidence in one's ability to look after oneself. Can one perhaps point here to a connection with that strange white terror, the "swart gevaar"?

Perhaps one of the least questioned and most deeply engrained aspects of our school system is the use of competition.

Many teachers tend to delude themselves that at least their "brighter" pupils are motivated by interest in their subjects. In fact many pupils who do well do so because doing well is their main pleasure and stimulus. For the "dull" students competition is a whip rather than a carrot, but it can be equally effective in making uninteresting work somewhat more purposeful. No one will deny that competition is, given the present attitudes of people towards each other in capitalist society, an essential part of that tried and trusted capitalist concept "incentive".

Capitalist society depends on competition for its continued existence.

DEPERSONALIZING

As practised in schools competition is fundamentally depersonalizing. *Given* the set syllabus and *given* the set curriculum every child is graded according to *marks*, a quantitative measure. Everybody knows that one cannot judge a human being on a quantitative scale but this is somehow forgotten in school. What "really matters" in schools in terms of a school's public image, is the number of successful matriculants. What is worse, this is what "really matters" to the pupils themselves by the time they get to their tenth year at school. A matric, for most pupils, is quantitatively interpreted in terms of future salaries (or university entrance qualifications and even higher salaries). Somewhere in this mad scramble for *more* material goods, even the mundane concept of quality becomes lost, while vague mumblings from the occasional pulpit about the "mammon of iniquity" meet with blank incomprehension.

Competition is the opposite of co-operation, sharing. Before we are willing to co-operate and share with someone else we usually want to accept him as an equal – not because he is the same as I am, but because he is different i.e. because he is an indefinable totality of qualities from whom I can derive much richness if I offer him something of myself in co-operation. This attitude is clearly morally superior to one where I exploit the other for material gain, yet it is competition, not sharing which is emphasized in school. The redistribution of economic resources which seems essential if South Africa is to enjoy a future of true peace between its peoples is being actively discouraged by the individualistic, competitive – as opposed to personalistic cooperative – nature of schools. What whites learn in school is that other people are there to be used for material gain. The "rat race" begins at school and there also are the seeds sown for the future exploitation of the black worker.

To those who say that selfishness (and hence competition) are part of human nature, one can only point out that a responsible society will do everything in its power to lessen the effects of this, not buttress it in the institutions specially designed to build a better tomorrow. I do not believe it is far fetched to trace these lines between the state of our society and the character of our schools. Judging from the official reaction to the "Youth Awareness" pamphlets handed out at high schools early this year, government and educational authorities are also very much of the opinion that the present constitution of White South African society depends greatly on the kind of schooling which white children receive. The hue and cry raised by white "liberals" and others about Christian National Education is probably largely misplaced. C.N.E. is only a symptom of far more serious problems.

Presuming my analysis is correct, what can the average well-intentioned teacher do in this situation, short of resigning? I am convinced that one can work actively towards some form of implementation of Illich's principles without necessarily being fired, though one's success in this would vary from school to school and depend also on the subjects one was teaching. However, it would require as much space to outline a programme along these lines as it has taken me to outline a few of Illich's principles and apply them to the South African context, so I have no intention of tackling this topic now.

To conclude: a recommendation to read and reread Illich's *Deschooling Society* (Calder and Boyers, London 1971, R4.45, pp 116). It is surely a milestone in recent educational writing. □

- N.B.**
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