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The Emergence of Compulsory Schooling and Anarchist Resistance

Matt Hern

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The history of the development of Western schooling is a complex and meandering thing, but I think it is worth looking at in a very abbreviated form here. A little insight into the logics and basis for contemporary compulsory schooling might be useful to social ecologists.

While young people were grouped together and instructed/trained/initiated into adult life in the very earliest human civilizations, the story of state schooling best begins with Plato (427–347 BC), who really laid much of the philosophical and pedagogical framework for schools as we know them in the West. Plato believed that education and schools were the most important function of the state, and that school spending should equal that of the military.

Precisely because schools were so important in Plato's conception of the ideal state, he was adamant that education not be left to private interests, who could not be trusted to keep the good of the whole in mind. He was also clear that once the system was in place,

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no change could occur, schools had to maintain strict ideological continuity:

Those who keep watch over our common wealth must take the greatest care not to overlook the least infraction of the rule against any innovation upon the established system of education.¹

In *The Republic* Plato asserted that the state should take responsibility for training children from the age of three and that each citizen could be guided by the system towards an ideal conception of justice and into the social class and occupation best suited for him. Education had to be universalized so that all citizens² could be effectively screened and placed. In this Plato was emphatic that it was the state's job to support and control schools and to make them compulsory. There was no question in Plato's mind that schools should be designed by the state to support the state.

Throughout Athenian times though, schools remained largely the province of elites, and the schools, palaestras and institutions of ephebic education were never universalized. Tendencies like the Sophists established numerous schools teaching public speaking, democratic governance and much else, but they remained private enterprises. In 600 BC Solon legislated that every Athenian boy must learn how to swim and read, but even dictates like that never became compulsorized in the manner that Plato had in mind. For the last five hundred years BC Greek and Macedonian culture flourished and spread throughout Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, and Athenian educational ideals maintained themselves and were widely diffused.

Through the rise of the Roman Empire Greek educational conceptions remained dominant, while being retrofitted to become

¹ From Fisher, R.T., *Classical Utopian Theories of Education*, New York: Bookman, 1963 p. 35.

² As far as Athenian conceptions of citizenship went: not very.

more focused around literature, sciences, music, dancing, while becoming more pedagogically utilitarian. While the Romans overwhelmingly left education up to private citizens and independent schools, a succession of emperors became interested in public education. Monarchs like Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius developed various common school programs by insisting that municipalities set up schools for the public (largely children of families too poor to attend private institutions) staffed by physicians, grammarians and sophists.

As the Roman Empire disintegrated however, ideals of secular education declined along with it, and for a millennia education became largely a matter of one's relationship with God, and religious schools in various forms dominated European conceptions of education.

The clerical monopoly of education established in the age of transition from the ancient world to the modern lasted for more than a thousand years, and its effects on the intellectual life of Europe were tremendous. The most obvious result was the general restriction of learning within the boundaries fixed by the Church's interests and doctrines... But even when the Church had broadened its ideals to permit studies not strictly religious in character or in aim, it frowned persistently on all ventures in philosophy and science which seemed likely to be inconsistent with the central articles of its faith.³

Fast-forward now through to the 1700's as Enlightenment Europe was emerging from the constraints of religious hegemonies, and many states were making the slow transitions from monarchical to republican forms of government. I realize it is a huge chronological leap, but it really is the best place to pick up the threads of educational philosophy and practice that contemporary schooling is built on. For at least a hundred years, since the middle of the

³ Boyd, W., *History of Western Education*, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965. p. 101.

1600's, Platonic ideas about common schools, national education systems and the state's responsibility had been slowly reinvigorated, drifting around Europe and finding particular root in England, France and Prussia.

In France especially, Enlightened intellectuals of all kinds, from Voltaire to Condorcet to Diderot, many galvanized by Rousseau's *Emile* (1763), began to produce all kinds of comprehensive plans for systematizing national schooling. Among the most influential of these proponents was Louis-Rene de la Chalotais who produced a critical text the year after *Emile* was published, an *Essay on National Education*. La Chalotais' interest was in developing a secular system of education to replace the 'vice of monasticity' and specifically the Jesuits, for whom he issued a powerful indictment on many levels.

La Chalotais argued that it was the State, not the Church that should hold the reigns of educational power and that those who hold the State as the highest authority, not God, should be those who were entrusted with youth.

I am not so unjust as to exclude the clergy altogether... but I protest against the exclusion of laymen. I venture to claim for the nation an education which depends only on the State, because it is essentially a matter for the State, because every nation has an inalienable right to instruct its members, because, in a word, the children of the State ought to be brought up by members of the State.⁴

La Chalotais' book had tremendous intellectual influence in France, and his insistence that church hegemony, especially in the case of schools, be definitively replaced with State hegemony both reflected and drove prevailing ideals.

Among those who saw the value to the State in controlling schools was Napoleon, who centralized all education bureaucracies in France and took complete control of education in the country.

⁴ *History of Western Education*, p. 302.

community control of resources, and the idea that democracy has to be local.

‘No one’ it was decreed ‘ may open a school or teach publicly unless he is a member of the imperial university and a graduate of one of its faculties ... No school may be set up outside the university and without the sanction of its head’...the whole system was modeled on the military regime of its founder. ‘The university, in fact, was organized like a regiment. The discipline was severe, and the teachers were subject to it as well as the scholars. When a teacher infringed any regulation and incurred censure, he was put under arrest. There was a uniform for all members of the university: a black robe with blue palms. The college was a miniature reproduction of the army. Each establishment was divided into companies with sergeants and corporals. Everything was done to the sound of the drum. It was soldiers and not men that were to be made.’⁵

The nature of Napoleonic schooling is important, because when the French Emperor led a devastating defeat of Prussia, the effective schooling of the victors was widely noted. No more so than in Prussia, where after the country was severely reduced and limited following the Jena peace accord of 1806, was left with few national resources to control.

Modeling themselves after France’s success in making national education a State priority, Prussia began to focus on the creation of compulsory system of State-controlled schools, an attempt that King Frederick had begun in the 1770’s but the process had been left incomplete. Among the most widely cited of pivotal points is Joann Fichte’s Address to the German Nation (1808) in which he laid bare the philosophical underpinnings and practical rationales for monopoly schooling. In essence he argued that Prussia was so humiliatingly defeated because its citizens lacked cohesion, a commitment to the nation and willingness to sacrifice for its good.

The State which introduced universally the national education proposed by us, from the moment that anew generation of youths

⁵ Ibid. p. 360

had passed through it, would need no special army at all, but would have in them an army such as no age has yet seen.⁶

Fichte's point was that schools could and should be used to create a compliant citizenry, one that would be used to following orders, comfortable submitting their will to a larger authority, familiar with hierarchical chains of command and instructed in the virtues of the State.

To that end Prussian educational theorists devised a model for schooling, built around centrally controlled curriculums, constant fragmentation of days into changing classes at the sound of a bell, obedience and teacher-directed classroom groupings. At the heart of the system though was the primacy of the State, and that children both belonged to and were the responsibility of the State. As Hegel put it, the State is "the higher authority in respect to which the laws and interests of the family and the civic community are subject and dependent".⁷

By 1819 the ideal of a national system of compulsory schooling was in place, and the Prussian economy and military was booming. Educational theorists from across the Western world came to Prussia to study its schools, and many left enthusiastic supporters. Among the most eager was Horace Mann, a young American aristocrat who was an education official in Massachusetts, which at that time, had a strong network of non-compulsory common schools.

Inspired by the Prussian example and Jeffersonian egalitarian/self-reliant ideals, Mann spent a dozen years advocating for public schooling, strengthening the Massachusetts schools, expanding their student base, increasing funding and building their stature. Mann was most interested in universalizing the system, arguing that insisting on every child acquiring basic, standardized skills

⁶ Cited in Spring, J., *A Primer of Libertarian Education*. p. 19

⁷ Cited in *History of Western Education* p. 351. also, Mulhern, J., *A History of Education*, New York: Ronald, 1946, Meyer, A.E., *An Educational History of the Western World*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1965 among the better histories referenced here.

Ferrer was intent upon loosing schools from both hegemonic teaching and State control. At the turn of the 20th Century it was becoming evident that not only were schools forging citizens but industrial workers, and that government control was essential to their nature.

They know, better than anyone else that their power is based almost entirely on the school. ... [They want schools] not because they hope for the revolution of society through education, but because they need individuals, workmen, perfected instruments of labor to make their industrial enterprises and the capital employed in them profitable... [They] have never wanted the uplift of the individual, but his enslavement; and it is perfectly useless to hope for anything but the school of to-day.¹⁷

Much like Godwin, Ferrer regarded schools as powerful governmental tools, made all the more dominant by their compulsory nature. After developing his school, sparking the rise of the Modern School movement¹⁸, starting the International League for the Rational Education of Children as well as a journal *L'Ecole Renovee*, Ferrer was executed in Spain in 1909 for plotting an insurrection.

These three were hardly on their own, there were many who resisted compulsory schooling right from its first proposal, from various political stances and rationales, some laudable some reprehensible, all over Europe and America. The point in highlighting Godwin, Tolstoy and Ferrer is to make clear that resistance to compulsory schooling is also at heart resistance to centralized control. In that, alternatives of all kind are built on ideals of self-reliance,

¹⁷ Cited in *Ibid.* p. 22 – 23.

¹⁸ The Modern School movement, championed by Emma Goldman among others, saw anarchist schools founded all over the world and Modern School meetings are still convened regularly in several countries.

Education is the tendency of one man to make another just like himself... Education is culture under restraint, culture is free. [Education is] when the teaching is forced upon the pupil, and when then instruction is exclusive, that is when only those subjects are taught which the educator regards as necessary.¹³

Tolstoy's school was centered around the idea of free inquiry and foreshadowed Summerhill¹⁴ in many ways. He held that since teaching and instruction were only means culture transmission when they were free, students should be left to learn what they wanted to learn, directing both themselves and the kinds of classes they wanted taught. Without compulsion, education was transformed into culture.¹⁵ Tolstoy was less concerned with state schooling (although he opposed it) and more interested in anarchist pedagogy.

Like Tolstoy, Francisco Ferrer was an active anarchist when he opened his school, the Modern School, in Spain in the 1901. Ferrer was most interested in creating an institution where children could be free of dogmatic ideological interests and could develop in an atmosphere not intended to forge good citizens, religious individuals or even inculcate strong morals. "Since we are not educating for a specific purpose, we cannot determine the capacity or incapacity of the child"¹⁶

¹³ Tolstoy, L., 'Education and Culture', in Weiner, L, trans., *Tolstoy On Education*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

¹⁴ See Chapter D-3.

¹⁵ Tolstoy's *On Education* is for me one of the most compelling stories about education I know of because it speaks so clearly to the conundrums and ironies of being with kids and learning how to respect and value their decisions. Tolstoy approached each question and instance with such an open heart that he often became mired in confusion. It is his honesty and the lack of historical precedence that I like so much.

¹⁶ Cited in Spring, J. p. 45.

would ensure full-capacity citizenship. He also believed that the continuing rush of immigrants could only be properly assimilated into American culture through a monopoly school system.

In 1852, after years of lobbying by Mann and his colleagues, Massachusetts passed legislation requiring school attendance, establishing mandatory common schools for elementary/junior students in every district and founding teacher training colleges. It was the hole in the dike, and by the 1880's every state in the union had passed similar laws. In 1880 the sincerity of the compulsory intent was formalized and fully enforced as the last homeschooling holdouts were taken from their parents on Cape Cod and marched to school by state militiamen.

In Canada the imposition of a compulsory system took much longer to implement across the country, was more haphazard in its development and provinces tended to be much more lax in its early enforcement. Ontario passed laws in 1871 that required four months of schooling per year from ages 7-12, but didn't rigorously enforce it until after WW1. BC had mandatory school laws by 1873, Nova Scotia left the matter to 'local option' until 1915, New Brunswick to 1905, but none of these provinces really pushed the matter much later, following Ontario's lead. Neither Quebec nor Newfoundland accepted compulsory education laws until 1943, Quebec defeating two attempts in 1912 and 1919. By the end of WW2 however, schooling was functionally and legally mandatory across Canada.⁸

As Ron Koetzsch explains, a universal, free and mandatory system was founded on four basic assumptions:

1. The state has the responsibility to educate all of its citizens.
2. The state has the right to force all parents to send their children to school.

⁸ See Johnson, F.H., *A Brief History of Canadian Education*, Toronto: McGraw Hill, 1968. p. 70 – 87.

3. The state has the right to force the entire community — including citizens without school-age children — to support by taxes the education of all children.
4. The state has the right to determine the nature of the education it offers.⁹

These assumptions remain intact today, and are the political basis for compulsory schooling. The second of those assumptions has come under increasing attack by homeschooling legal advocates in particular and has been conditionally rolled-back in some areas, but remains an essential assumption. The fourth of these tenets has also been challenged repeatedly, with less success, and the first and third have never been seriously assailed.

It is a philosophically Platonic, Prussian-inspired compulsory school system that exists today, not only in North America, but one that is being rapidly becoming globalized in form, function and content.

The emergence of universal schooling was necessarily tied to the health and hegemony of the modern State: the two are intricately linked. Thus, the most articulate and powerful opposition to schooling has always come from anarchists, three of whom I want to mention briefly here; William Godwin, Leo Tolstoy and Francisco Ferrer.

Godwin is frequently recognized as the first anarchist philosopher, with the publication of *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) the first articulated refutation of the State, and his 1797 book, *The Enquirer* the first published rejection of national schooling. He had tried to open a school in 1783 and when it failed, turned to writing. Godwin believed that compulsory schooling would become an immensely malleable instrument in the hands of government to manipulate and effect public opinion for their own uses.

⁹ Koetzsch, R., *A Handbook of Educational Alternatives*, Boston: Shambhala, 1997. p. 4.

Before we put so powerful a machine under the direction of so ambiguous an agent, it behooves us to consider well what it is that we do. Government will not fail to employ it, to strengthen its hands, and perpetuate its institutions.¹⁰

Godwin's position was that genuine education should be directed towards the veneration and pursuit of truth and justice, but that national schooling would always subordinate those goals to their larger political interests.

Had the scheme of a national education been adopted when despotism was most triumphant, it is not to be believed that it could have for ever stifled the voice of truth. But it would have been the most formidable and profound contrivance for that purpose, that imagination can suggest.¹¹

Thus schools were mere tools, and critically influential tools, built for the maintenance and proliferation of State ideologies and patriotism. Godwin's position was particularly interesting because he was married to Mary Wollstonecraft, the writer and feminist, who was a vocal advocate for compulsory schooling, arguing that it would be the best means for inculcating an ethic of equality and allowing equal access for men and women.¹²

Leo Tolstoy, Christian anarchist and celebrated novelist, on the other hand, was more interested in children than writing about them. He established a school for peasant children on his estate, called, like the journal he founded exploring his thinking about schools and children, *Yasnaya Polyana*. Significantly, Tolstoy differentiated between education and culture in a way that I consider striking and still relevant. He wrote that

¹⁰ Cited in Spring, J., *A Primer of Libertarian Education*. p. 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 18

¹² Probably some excellent dinner conversations.