

Freedom for children

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The age at which British children need no longer submit to compulsory school attendance was recently raised from fifteen to sixteen. For many of the people running Britain's schools, already overwhelmed with insoluble problems, this extra burden seemed like the last straw. The school leaving age, they cried, should have stayed at fifteen.

Libertarians believe that the school leaving age should be lowered to zero. A child ought only to attend school if he wishes to, either because he likes it for its own sake, or he has agreed to it as part of a contract freely entered into between him and another free person. That the state should compel any of its citizens who are not convicted criminals regularly to attend any institution whatever is a monstrous violation of basic human rights, and schools as we now know them are worse even than that. Not only are children coerced into attending them and branded as criminals if they refuse, but once there they must submit to "education", that is, to arbitrary brainwashing, made less pernicious only by the utterly disorganised and incompetent way in which it is usually inflicted.

All forms of compulsory education are indefensible, no matter how kind or strict the teachers, luxurious or squalid the buildings, "traditional" or "progressive" the curriculum. No one system of schooling can ever satisfy every child forcibly subjected to it. A child who craves kindness, understanding and needlework will be miserable in a school ruled by birch wielding enthusiasts for rugby football, examination success and regular bowel movements. But it is equally intolerable that another child who wishes to master the composition of Greek hexameters and to enjoy regular competitive sport should be made miserable by his lack of prowess in the art of "human relationships". Progressive education as it is now understood has as much to do with true freedom as a prison cell decked out in pretty pink wallpaper.

Not only does compulsory schooling enslave

children; it also enslaves their teachers. That schools are jails means that teachers must be jailers. An energetic adolescent, bored out of his skull at the back of a classroom, as well as being himself victimised is also an appalling imposition on the hapless adult burdened with the task of "teaching" him, that is, preventing him from staging constant prison riots. Just as no pupil should be forced by law to submit to any particular teacher, so no teacher should be obliged to try and interest a "pupil" who manifestly is not interested. Yet few teachers can avoid this problem if they want regular employment. Some grit their teeth, and master the mean minded skills of the drill sergeant. Others, potentially brilliant teachers if only allowed to concentrate on actual teaching, are driven out of the profession in despair.

IDLE HANDS

But if the gates of the schools are thrown open, what will happen then? If the teachers don't whip the kids into line, who will? Will not the threat of prison riots merely be replaced by riots in the streets? There are enough delinquent gangs on the rampage as it is without a flood of new recruits being poured into their lawless ranks.

The answer is that children must be allowed to pursue their own purposes in the the way that most adults do now. The reason why the devil is the only one now finding work for the idle hands of children is that the law systematically prevents anyone else from doing it. Libertarians believe that children should be allowed to go to work, earn money by the work they do, and spend that money the way they like. They should be allowed to own property, go into debt and into business. They should have the right to live and to travel wherever they can afford to. In a word, they should be free. Free to drag coal along a mineshaft, free to sweep soot out of a chimney or act in a pornographic film, if that is what they judge to be in their interests. And they may very well make just such judgements if the alternative is starvation, as it once was in this country and still is in many others. Well-fed moralists who want the law to prohibit such children from grappling with the horrors of reality merely reveal their ignorance of what that reality actually is.

Such freedom will straight away solve most of the problems of juvenile law and order. Children will soon learn what most of them only learn now when they leave school, that compared to all the honest and respectable ways a free citizen can use to live a happy life, the dishonest and undisciplined ways offer very poor rewards indeed. As for the incorrigibly lawless minority, is it not obvious that the organisations hired to handle this problem ought themselves to employ children? Some of the children they hire will excel, just as some children already excel at the few things they are allowed to do now, such as play chess or the violin, sing pop songs or appear in circuses, plays, films and television commercials. Just as soon as all children are allowed to try, many will become millionaires. Yet now the Shirley Temples of industry and high finance are reduced to peddling illicit fag ends in the playground.

PARENTS' RIGHTS

And what of the parents? Are their rights to be trampled underfoot by their newly liberated offspring? Certainly not. If parents are offering their children free board, lodging and skiing holidays, then they should be entitled to attach any conditions to these gifts that they care to. If their children don't like being hit occasionally, or having to attend parentally selected schools where purple blazers are compulsory, then they should be free to leave, and face the consequences. But if the children choose to stay then the people in whose property they live and whose resources they consume should be entitled to make what rules they want to. If the children won't obey these rules then, just as they ought to be free to make other living arrangements, so too should their parents be free to throw them out. Parents do not own their children, but neither do children own their parents. In Britain we have state agencies which force children back "home" when they wish to live elsewhere, for example with the Moonies. In Japan they have laws forcing people to look after their children, and parents, whether they want to or not. Both systems are wrong. Libertarians are not against families, any more than they are against education. But although most of them indulge constantly in both these pleasures, they do not believe that either

should be compulsory. Both family life and education have in fact flourished as never before in recent years, but this is because people have at last had the time and money for them, not because of state coercion. The quality of both will be greatly improved if state coercion is removed.

When you examine them, most of the arguments against freedom for children turn out to be arguments against freedom itself. This isn't surprising. People who spend their formative years being systematically denied freedom, even if they are at the same time lined up in desks and harangued about its virtues, are not likely to be unreservedly in favour of it. Libertarians should thus be especially insistent that children be free from the start. Meanwhile most people weren't free as children, they don't see other children being free, and so they tend to believe that children simply aren't up to it. Just as the blacks of the American South were honestly thought by those who owned them to be a different order of being so now children are considered to be, well... children. Feckless, stupid, unreliable, undisciplined. But children are not born this way. Like black slaves they are made so by the institutions that shape their lives.

The adults that these unfree children later become tend to retain a pervasive distrust of their own ability to do things for themselves. Many things they learn they can do for themselves, despite whatever their teachers may have told them. But freedom remains for them an exception: a clearing in a forest of tyranny.

Most of all, people fear that freedom for children will destroy the ability or willingness of children to make war, and this fear has much sense in it. When the rulers of Prussia were rebuilding their shattered state after its defeat by Napoleon, they started not with their army but with their schools, and they modelled the latter on the former. So if children are not conscripted into schools will they submit to being conscripted into armies? If not forced to worship their flag, will they follow it into battle? Probably not. Which is one of the best reasons of all for Libertarians to take the idea of freedom for children seriously.