

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

The Political Dimension of Free and Home Schooling

Stefan Blankertz

Independent Scholar

During the 1960s and onwards, the idea of free or alternative education was strongly associated with the politics of the New Left. In contrast to the Old Left, the New Left stressed autonomy of the individual and the expression of individual creativity next to the formation of a collective which was thought of as a grass-roots process. Being a revolt of the young, the focus of the New Left was often resistance to public schooling and universities. The vast and authoritarian structures of public education were seen as the death of individuality and self-regulated participatory democracy. The answer of the New Left was to set up self-organized educational institutions independent of the state apparatus. One of those activists at the forefront of this line of thinking and acting was the anarchist writer Paul Goodman (see Goodman, 1964/1971).

Alternative, free and anti-authoritarian education have been historically almost synonyms. The growing number of protagonists of the free school idea as well as some independent observers thought that alternative educational institutions independent of the state would replace many of the public schools in a couple of years, especially in the US where it used to be relatively easy to set up private school

alternatives. In many European countries it has been, and still is, much harder to do so.

Other than in Europe, in the US criticism of state schooling was not only to be found on the left wing. The Old American Right, classical liberal, individualist, conservative, always had been skeptical about the idea that the state instead of parents should be the educator of the children. The Old Right and the New Left found themselves in an odd agreement in the question of public education as well as in the question of opposing a distant war in the Far East. Out of this agreement grew the modern Libertarian Movement, set up by Murray Rothbard who coined the slogan “beyond left and right” (see Rothbard, 1973/2006, 1971/2007).

From the European—at least the German—perspective, it was a strange coalition when in the second half of the 1970s socialist educator Christopher Jencks in California started one of the first experiments with school vouchers to enable more choice in the realm of education. Milton Friedman, the herald of neo-liberalism, had thought up the idea of such vouchers. The experiment was backed by the republican Nixon administration. Crippled and limited by the

bureaucracy and the resistance of the teachers' unions, the experiment did not yield the results hoped for.

As early as 1973, one of the heroes of independent schools, the Gestalt therapist George Dennison—founder of the legendary First Street School in New York and close friend of Paul Goodman—warned that the state is flexible enough to “occupy” the alternative movement (1969/1999). Exactly this is what happened. The number of alternative schools did not explode but rather the state schools adopted some of the methodology of anti-authoritarian education. Many of the now ageing proponents of the New Left are content with the fact that in the public schools they currently teach social competence, emotional intelligence, ecology, sexual tolerance, feminism, atheism, gender mainstreaming, multiculturalism, politically correct speech, checking your privilege, anti-capitalist, anti-discriminatory, anti-sexist and anti-racist ideas, you name it. If you get into power, why continue to care about self-determination?

Those who continue to cling to the idea of alternative education have been confronted with increasing repression of the state and declining public sympathy. But some of them began to realize what Milton Friedman already explained in the mid 1950s: Because public schools are (seemingly) free of (direct) charge it is very difficult to out-compete them with an offer you have to pay for—more so because the possible customers have been forced to pay already for the public service though the tax system (see Friedman, 2002). One of the few left wing educators who realized the importance of “double pay” in the formation of the monopoly of

public education was David Nasaw (1979/1981).

Consequently, there was a shift from setting up alternative free schools to promoting home education. To school your kids at home does not imply paying a fee or to be confronted with organizational and financial difficulties; and you and your children are not as exposed to the public as when there is a non-public school building. One of the early promoters of this shift was John Holt (1981/2003).

However looked at more closely the idea of home schooling does not really solve the economic problem of alternative education. Parents who educate their children themselves also have paid for public schooling via their taxes. They also suffer an economic disadvantage by loss of wages. Moreover home schooling is limited to parents who have some universal knowledge and educational genius enough to “teach their own.” Lastly but not least, home education undoes the merits of a capitalist division of labor and is a fallback into pre-capitalist home industry.

Having the right to teach your own children (which is a freedom we do not enjoy in Germany) is better than nothing at all but it is not the answer to the educational plight of society. If the idea of alternative free education should not be limited to a tiny minority of wealthy and intellectually fit parents, three points must be realized:

1. Alternative free education ought not to be mingled with methods and contents. The idea must be that every parent, every teacher, every school, every educational entrepreneur has the right to try

out their ideas. You have to tolerate the others' ideas and practices as long as you are not forced by e.g., compulsory education to submit to it. To mingle the idea of alternative education with content and methods has, at least, the tendency that you are ready to use the power of the state to enforce them when people are not willing to submit to them by their free will.

2. The idea of alternative free education cannot grow out of its ecological niche until the principle has been established that parents who do not send their children to public schools are entitled to get back the amount of their tax money dedicated to public schooling. Without insight into the economic mechanism that empowers public schools the idea of alternative free education has no practical future.
3. The resistance of state bureaucracy to allowing alternative free education has to do with the very structure of the state itself. Keeping the education of the young under strict control is essential to promoting controllable grown-ups who think that they cannot survive without the help of big mother state. The idea of

alternative free education cannot win influence in society without de-legitimization of the state and its grip upon the lives and the earnings of the citizens.

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Author Details

Stefan Blankertz, born 1956, is a German writer, theorist of Gestalt therapy and political activist. As early as 1974 he translated and published in Germany Paul Goodman's *Compulsory Mis-education*. From 1980 onwards, he promoted the idea of anarcho-capitalism in Germany, adopted from Paul Goodman and Murray Rothbard. He is the author of many books, lyrics, novels, and psychological and political philosophy alike. For further information and contact see: <http://www.stefanblankertz.de>



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