

THE STUDENT AS NIGGER

Essays and Stories by Jerry Farber

THE STUDENT AS NIGGER

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FOR MADDIE

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PREFACE

Early in 1967 I wrote "The Student As Nigger" and published it in the Los Angeles Free Press. The article was an outgrowth of my attempts to be a good teacher. After several years in the English department at L.A. State College, I had decided that there were limits to how well you could teach in an authoritarian and dehumanized school system. So I thought I would do my bit to help change the system.

When "The Student As Nigger" appeared, I hoped that a few other underground papers would pick it up but I had no idea that it would arouse the interest that it did. The article, particularly its central metaphor, embodied ideas and feelings that had been around for a long time but were then working their way rapidly up to the surface. I don't know exactly how often it has been reprinted; I would guess about 500 times. It has appeared in several magazines, in a book, in almost all of the underground papers and, most frequently, in student newspapers and pamphlets on hundreds of campuses in the United States and Canada.

The article has left a wake of trouble behind it--trouble that neatly illustrates its argument. For example: two high-school teachers in the Los Angeles area were fired on the spot for reading it to their classes. A Southern California state senator wrote a newspaper editorial attacking it as an "almost incredible abuse"; the article was subsequently debated in the state legislature's education committee. Campus editors who have reprinted it have routinely been called on the administration carpet. Frequently schools where "The Student As Nigger" has appeared have themselves come under attack from the surrounding community. At one college a parent who had read it became so furious when he heard I was scheduled to speak there that he got 5000 signatures on a (unsuccessful) petition to keep me off campus.

At the University of Montana the article was used in a Freshman English class and was promptly attacked by an ROTC colonel, whose daughter was in the class. The colonel sent faculty members copies of the article, in which he had underlined all the objectionable words--all the way down to such modest vulgarities as "rat's ass." To my surprise the colonel even underlined "provo" (I suppose that, not knowing what it meant, he didn't want to take any chances). Interestingly enough, though the colonel's delicate sensibilities required him to underline "student-faculty lovemaking" and "goddamn school," it never occurred to him to underline "nigger." Before long the article became a major issue in a state-wide campaign to defeat a higher-education tax levy referendum. Thousands of copies were mailed to voters. Accompanying material urged citizens to vote down the referendum (it squeaked by) in protest and referred to "The Student As Nigger" as a "dirty, filthy source of moral poison," "degenerate writing" and "obscene pornographic smut" (the three biggies here in one memorable phrase).

In Canada "The Student As Nigger" was reprinted intact in the Hansard (official record) of the Canadian Parliament by an angry M.P., who described it in a speech to the Senate as a "suppurating sore in the body politic" and as "probably the worst piece of writing in a moral sense that has ever gone into a Senate Hansard."

I have received scarcely any criticism from students on the article. In fact, it seems that there is little in "The Student As Nigger" that most students don't already know very well. Students, and a number of teachers as well, have welcomed it as an expression of their anger, their frustration and their growing desire for change. The outraged criticism has come primarily from administrators, parents and elected officials--and this outrage has centered not so much on the ideas in the article as on its "filthy language." There is little I can say in answer to this kind of criticism. I don't believe that any words are filthy, not even words like "counterinsurgency," and certainly not words like "fuck," "pussy,"

"cock" and so on. In any case, I would never censor anything I wrote just as I would never censor my speech in the classroom. I don't go out of my way, as some persons have assumed, to use so-called taboo words but, on the other hand, I don't go out of my way to avoid them. They simply occur where they want to, as do other words in the language. In "The Student As Nigger," the diction I used was very much a part of what I was trying to say--so much so that I have had to refuse dozens of reprint requests (including one from the New York Times) which would have involved cutting out a number of salty phrases.

When people have criticized the ideas in "The Student As Nigger," they have tended to accuse me of advocating educational anarchy. This would be both a respectable and an intriguing position but it is not mine. Lately, I've noticed, when you attack existing structures, you are accused of advocating that there be no structures at all. Certainly it is not anarchy to say that students and teachers should run their own schools. Nor is it anarchy to want to do away with the grading system and similar claptrap. The phrase "campus anarchy," which we hear a good deal nowadays, appeals to a familiar kind of psychological hangup. When you're bound up tight, any change or loosening seems to threaten anarchy. To persons in such a position, the choice often appears limited to one between iron restraint and total abandon (whatever that means).

As time passes, my attitude toward "The Student As Nigger" changes. I still like it and I'm glad I wrote it--but the article has moved away from the center of my thoughts about school and has come to occupy a more peripheral position. When I wrote it, I was concerned mainly with the relationship between students and teachers, with their respective roles. Since then I have thought a great deal about the institutional framework within which these roles are acted out and, even more, about the still larger social framework within which our schools exist.

The analogy with which I began seems more appropriate than I realized at the time. Originally I saw students as niggers and slaves primarily in

relation to their teachers and administrators. Now I realize more clearly than before that students are society's slaves and that teachers are no more than overseers. It's a mistake to get hung up exclusively in a struggle against teachers just as it's a mistake to let one's anger toward ghetto cops obscure the larger threat of the racist society that pays their salary and buys their bullets.

For the past two years I have been trying to see as deeply as I could into our schools and to work out an analysis of them that would take into account their intertwined cause-effect relationship with the surrounding society. The result of this effort is "The Student and Society," which opens this book.

The essay which follows it, "The Four-Fold Path," is a partial and tentative answer to the question which I have been asked most often when speaking to students: what can a person do to change the educational system? I've included the article because I thought it might be useful but I have some doubts. Students who ask "What can I do?" usually aren't ready. When they're ready, they don't need to be told what to do.

The second part of this book is not at all about school, yet the essays and stories in it are, to me, quite in the same spirit as the first part. The very last piece, for example, "Hancock Park in Late December," was written with no thought of school; yet it embodies a kind of feeling, I think, that we rarely get in school now but that we ought to and, hopefully, will get when our schools are straightened out or, perhaps, replaced with something else entirely.

THE STUDENT AND SOCIETY: AN ANNOTATED MANIFESTO

School is where you let the dying society put its trip on you. Our schools may seem useful: to make children into doctors, sociologists, engineers--to discover things. But they're poisonous as well. They exploit and enslave students; they petrify society; they make democracy unlikely. And it's not what you're taught that does the harm but how you're taught. Our schools teach you by pushing you around, by stealing your will and your sense of power, by making timid square apathetic slaves out of you--authority addicts.

Schooling doesn't have to be this destructive. If it weren't compulsory, if schools were autonomous and were run by the people in them, then we could learn without being subdued and stupefied in the process. And, perhaps, we could regain control of our own society.

Students can change things if they want to because they have the power to say "no." When you go to school, you're doing society a favor. And when you say "no," you withhold much more than your attendance. You deny continuity to the dying society; you put the future on strike. Students can have the kind of school they want--or even something else entirely if they want--because there isn't going to be any school at all without them.

NOTES

(1) "SCHOOL IS WHERE YOU LET THE DYING SOCIETY PUT ITS TRIP ON YOU."

School is a genetic mechanism for society, a kind of DNA process that continually recreates styles, skills, values, hangups--and so keeps the whole thing going. The dying part of society--the society that has been--molds the emerging part more or less in its own image, and fashions the society that will be.

Schooling also makes change possible--evolution, if you like. But here we run into a problem. Although our schools foster enormous technological change, they help to keep social change within very narrow limits. Thanks to them, the technological capacity of society evolves at an explosive rate. But there is no comparable, adaptive evolution in the overall social framework, nor in the consciousness of the individuals who make up society. It isn't just that schools fail to create the necessary social change. They actually restrain it. They prevent it. (*How* they prevent it is the subject of the Notes that follow.)

When I say that schools serve the society-that-has-been, the dying society, I mean just that. It isn't "society" itself that runs our schools. Children and adolescents are a huge segment of society but they don't run schools. Even young adults don't run them. Nor as a general rule do workers. Nor do black people (although a few Negroes do). Nor do the poor in general. By and large our schools are in the hands of the most entrenched and rigidly conservative elements in society. In the secondary and elementary schools, students, of course, have no power and teachers have little power. Administrators possess somewhat more, but the real control comes from those solid Chamber-of-Commerce types--those priests of the American Way--on the school board. They uphold the sovereignty of the past; they are the very avatars of institutional inertia. As for the colleges and universities, California, where I teach, is typical. Higher education is controlled primarily by the business elite, aided by a sprinkling of aging politicians, venerable clergymen and society matrons.* And in the rare cases when these trustees and governing boards relax their tight control, they are backstopped by our elected officials, whose noses are always aquiver for

subversion and scandal and who are epitomized in that querulous Mrs. Grundy, our current governor.

(* Read James Ridgeway's "The Closed Corporation: American Universities in Crisis" (New York, 1968). Ridgeway provides extensive information on the interlocking managements of universities and major corporations, as well as an analysis of the "big-business" aspect of the universities themselves.)

While schools stifle social change, technological change is, to repeat, another matter. The society-that-has-been, in its slavering pursuit of higher profits and better weapons, demands technological progress at a fantastic, accelerating rate. Universities have consequently become a giant industry in their own right. A few tatters of commencement-day rhetoric still cling to them but it becomes more obvious every day that the modern university is not much more than a Research, Development and Training center set up to service government and industry. And so we have a technological explosion within the rigid confines of our unchanging social institutions and values. Schools today give us fantastic power at the same time as they sap our ability to handle it. Good luck, everybody.

(2) "IT'S NOT *WHAT* YOU'RE TAUGHT THAT DOES THE HARM BUT *HOW* YOU'RE TAUGHT."

In fact, for most of your school life, it doesn't make that much difference what subject you're taught. The real lesson is the method. The medium in school truly is the message. And the medium is, above all, coercive. You're forced to attend. The subjects are required. You *have* to do homework. You *must* observe school rules. And throughout, you're bullied into docility and submissiveness. Even modern liberal refinements don't really help. So you're called an underachiever instead of a dummy. So they send you to a counselor instead of beating you. It's

still not your choice to be there. They may pad the handcuffs--but the handcuffs stay on.

Which particular subject they happen to teach is far less important than the fact that it is required. We don't learn that much subject matter in school anyway in proportion to the huge part of our lives that we spend there. But what we do learn very well, thanks to the method, is to accept choices that have been made for us. Which rule they make you follow is less important than the fact that there are rules. I hear about English teachers who won't allow their students to begin a sentence with "and." Or about high schools where the male students are not permitted to wear a T-shirt unless it has a pocket. I no longer dismiss such rules as merely pointless. The very point to such rules is their pointlessness.

The true and enduring content of education is its method. The method that currently prevails in schools is standardized, impersonal and coercive. What it teaches best is--itself. If, on the other hand, the method were individual, human and free, it would teach that. It would not, however, mesh smoothly into the machine we seem to have chosen as a model for our society.

It's how you're taught that does the harm. You may only study geometry for a semester--or French for two years. But *doing what you're told*, whether or not it makes sense, is a lesson you get every blessed school day for twelve years or more. You know how malleable we humans are. And you know what good learners we are--how little time it takes us to learn to drive a car or a plane or to play passable guitar. So imagine what the effect must be upon our apt and impressionable minds of a twelve-year course in servility. Think about it. Twelve years of tardy bells and hall passes; of graded homework, graded tests, graded conduct; of report cards, GPA's, honors lists, citizenship ratings; of dress codes, straight lines and silence. *What is it that they're teaching you?* Twelve years pitted against your classmates in a daily Roman circus. The game is Doing What You're Told. The winners get gold stars, affection, envy;

they get A's and E's, honors, awards and college scholarships. The losers get humiliation and degradation. The fear of losing the game is a great fear: it's the fear of swats, of the principal's office, and above all the fear of failing. What if you fail and have to watch your friends move past you to glory? And, of course, the worst could happen: you could be expelled. Not that very many kids get swats or fail or are expelled. But it doesn't take many for the message to get across. These few heavy losers are like severed heads displayed at the city gates to keep the populace in line.

And, to make it worse, all of this pressure is augmented by those countless parents who are ego freaks and competition heads and who forcibly pass their addiction on to their kids. The pressure at school isn't enough; they *pay* the kids for A's and punish them for D's and F's.

But can you feel any of this? Can you understand what has been done to your mind? We get so used to the pressure that we scarcely are conscious of it without making some effort.

Why does the medium of education affect us so deeply while its purported content--the subject matter--so often slips our minds? This is partly because the content varies from year to year while the form remains more or less the same; but also because the form--a structure of rules, punishments, rewards--affects us directly in a real way, while the subject matter may have no such immediate grasp on our lives. After all, don't we tend to learn best what matters most? Under a coercive system it isn't really the subject that matters; what matters is pleasing the authorities. These two are far from the same thing.

Remember French class in high school (or college, for that matter)? The teacher calls on you, one at a time, to see if you've prepared the questions at the end of *Leçon 19*. "Marshall," she asks, "*qu'est-ce que Robert alliat faire le mardi?*" Marshall doesn't get to respond that he doesn't give a shit--not even in French. Fat chance. While he's in school, he's got to be servile to stay out of trouble. And the law requires him to

be in school. He's got to do the questions in Leçon 19 because the teacher said to. He's got to do what the teacher said in order to pass the course. He's got to pass the course to get to college. He's got to get to college because it's been explained to him that he'll be a clod all his life if he doesn't; at assembly they've put up charts showing how many hundreds of thousands of dollars more he'll make in his lifetime if he goes to college. And, of course, there's an immediate reason as well for Marshall to have done his homework. If he hasn't, he'll be embarrassed in front of the class.

The educational medium has a very real hold on his life. Unfortunately, the subject probably does not. So we can't console him for all this dull toil by pointing out that he is at least learning French. Because, of course, he isn't. He'll take two years of French in high school. And when he gets to college, it will be like they never happened. Right? In fact, some acquaintances from Montreal recently told me that English-speaking students there are required to take French every year from the second grade on. And yet, I was told, after ten years of the language, they still haven't learned it.

Or what about Freshman English? What actually gets taught? The purported subject matter is usually writing. But consider, up front, who teaches the course. It's usually some well-meaning instructor or TA whose own writing achievements have reached their zenith in a series of idle and heroically dull papers, written in pretentious faggot-academic for his graduate classes. And how does he teach? What's his method? Well, that depends because things are changing. Somewhere in some college there is undoubtedly a heavyweight, on the verge of being fired, who is teaching silence to freshmen so that they can hear themselves. Maybe somewhere else a teacher has renounced grading and is letting the students write what they want. Most Freshman English teachers, however, are doing the standard thing. They're demanding and then grading "themes" on capital punishment and on lowering the voting age. They're compelling students to drudge through topic-sentence exercises,

outline exercises, library exercises, inference-judgment-report exercises, and a flood of other dreary busy work. They think they know the difference between a B minus essay and a C plus essay, and they teach their students to believe in such foolishness. They "correct" their students' work with *ex cathedra* judgments, none of which a student is at liberty to ignore.

In Freshman English, the method teaches you--in case you haven't already gotten the message--that writing is a drag. It's a job you do to please someone else (God knows that writing a theme on The Vanishing Individualist is hardly your own idea of how to spend Sunday night). Writing is school work and "English" is learning how to please your English teacher. What interest there is in the course is provided not so much by your writing experience as by the method. That is to say, you may write something tonight but the payoff, the real excitement, won't come until next week when the papers are handed back and you can find out "what you got." That's what makes it all worthwhile; that's what school writing is all about: pleasing the teacher.

The very essence of Freshman English is that term paper they force out of you. In perfect order, impeccably footnoted, unreal and totally useless--that term paper, that empty form, is pretty much the content of the course: submission--alienation--learning to live a pretend intellectual life, pretend-caring about pretend things.

Sometimes you even get a pretend choice; you're allowed to pick your own topic. But you don't get to make the one choice that would give the whole business some meaning: the choice to write no paper at all. Oh, you *can* make that choice. But then you don't get through Freshman English, which means you don't get through college and, therefore, don't get your hands in the gigantic goodie-box which is programmed to open only upon insertion of a college diploma. Or maybe you even get drafted right away. Yeah, you've got a hell of a choice. And college teachers like to style themselves "seekers after truth." Sure. "Know the truth and the

truth shall get you a B." The truth in a freshman term paper is about the same truth a banker can expect from his shoeshine boy.

I'm sorry to sound so snotty about composition teachers. God knows, I've been there too. In my first year I even assigned research papers in Freshman English. I didn't really want to but I did it anyway "to prepare students for their other courses." I prepared them all right. My method was the term paper. What I taught was alienation and servility. Now I try to *un* prepare students for their other courses. I only wish I were better at it.

The medium of schooling, by the way, covers much more than assignments, grading, rules and so on. If *how* you're taught exerts a profound effect, what about the physical environment? What does a classroom teach?

Consider how most classrooms are set up. Everyone is turned toward the teacher and away from his classmates. You can't see the faces of those in front of you; you have to twist your neck to see the persons behind you. Frequently, seats are bolted to the floor or fastened together in rigid rows. This classroom, like the grading system, isolates students from each other and makes them passive receptacles. All the action, it implies, is at the front of the room.

What would be better? A circle? For a while I used to ask classes to sit in a circle (in rooms where we weren't bolted down). It was much better. But after a time I become depressed about it. It was still awkwardly geometrical; it was still my trip, and they were still dutifully following orders. I felt that if I told them to sit on each other's heads, they'd do it. So next semester I simply took a position in the second seat of the fourth row or thereabouts. I still do this most of the time. Some classes begin to move their chairs around, often within a matter of days, into a sort of loose, pleasant jumble, although they usually maintain a certain pious distance from me, leaving me at the center of a small but unmistakable

magic circle. Occasionally, a class is unbelievably faithful to the traditional seating plan. They sit mournfully facing an empty altar and they sprain their necks trying to see me and the other students. I curse and mutter but they hold firm. It's almost as though they're saying:, "Screw you, you bastard, you're going to have to tell us to move." And I swear to myself I won't. But I usually give in about half way through the semester.

But why those chairs at all? Why forty identical desk-chairs in a bleak, ugly room? Why should school have to remind us of jail or the army? (A rhetorical question, I'm afraid.) For that matter, why are there classrooms? Suppose we started over from scratch. What would be a good place to learn stress analysis? What would be a good place to study Zen? To learn about child development? To learn Spanish? To read poetry? You know, wherever I've seen classrooms, from UCLA to elementary schools in Texas, it's always the same stark chamber. The classrooms we have are a nationwide chain of mortuaries. What on earth are we trying to teach?

The scariest thing about a classroom is that it acts as a sort of psychological switch. You walk into a classroom; some things switch on in you and others switch off. All sorts of weird unreal things start to happen. Any teacher who has tried simply to be real in a classroom knows what I'm talking about. This is so hard to express . . . you walk in and everyone's face is a mask.

Last semester I had the best room yet. Because of overcrowding, one class was in an apartment living room on the edge of campus. The school did its well-meaning best to kill the room, boarding up the door to the kitchen and the can and literally filling the small room with long formica-topped grammar-school tables (the formica itself is a message: furniture has won; you ain't carving no initials in these desks, baby). For a while we floundered miserably but then things got better. Sometimes we sat in a big square. Sometimes we sat on top of the tables; once we

crawled under them where it was dark and restful. Sometimes we'd pile up the tables and sit in a bunch on the carpet. Sometimes we'd sit on the grass outside. It was only a very small gain though. Given our conditioning and the overall college context, I could have held that class at the beach, at home, in the Avalon Ballroom. I would still be *holding* it; they would still want to rest limply in my hands--good natured, obedient students. Neither they nor I can get out from under our schooling so quickly as we might like.

I think that what we need is not to touch up or modernize classrooms but rather to eliminate them.

(Question from the audience: "Where would we learn?" Answer: "We'd manage.")

(3) "THEY EXPLOIT AND ENSLAVE STUDENTS; THEY PETRIFY SOCIETY . . ."

Let me not be accused of ignoring "what's right with" our schools--to use the patriotic jargon. Schools are where you learn to read, write sort of, and do long division. Everyone knows about that. In college you learn about Pavlov, mitosis, Java Man and why we fought the Civil War. You may forget about Java Man but you act to keep your degree just the same, and it gets you a job. College is also where they discover new medicines, new kinds of plastic and new herbicides to use in Asia. But everybody knows all that. I want to return to the exploit-enslave-and-petrify part.

It's ironic. Radicals dream midnight police raids, or sit around over coffee and talk with glittering eyes about Repression--about those internment camps that are waiting empty. And all the time Miss Jones does her quiet thing with the kids in third grade.

People like to chat about the fascist threat or the communist threat. But their visions of repression are for the most part romantic and self indulgent: massacres, machine guns drowning out La Marseillaise. And in the meantime someone stops another tenth grader for a hall-pass check and notices that his T-shirt doesn't have a pocket on it. In the meantime the Bank of America hands out another round of high-school achievement awards. In the meantime I grade another set of quizzes.

God knows the real massacres continue. But the machine gun isn't really what is to be feared most in our civilized Western world. It just isn't needed all that much. The kids leave Miss Jones' class. And they go on to junior high and high school and college. And most of them will never need to be put in an internment camp. Because they're already there. Do you think I'm overstating it? That's what's so frightening: we have the illusion that we're free.

In school we learn to be good little Americans--or Frenchmen--or Russians. We learn how to take the crap that's going to be shoveled on us all our lives. In school the state wraps up people's minds so tight that it can afford to leave their bodies alone.

Repression? You want to see victims of repression? Come look at most of the students at San Diego State College, where I work. They *want* to be told what to do. They don't know how to be free. They've given their will to this institution just as they'll continue to give their will to the institutions that engulf them in the future.

Schools exploit you because they tap your power and use it to perpetuate society's trip, while they teach you not to respect your own. They turn you away from yourself and toward the institutions around you. Schools petrify society because their method, characterized by coercion from the top down, works against any substantial social change. Students are coerced by teachers, who take orders from administrators, who do the bidding of those stalwarts of the status quo on the board of education or

the board of trustees. Schools petrify society because students, through them, learn how to adjust unquestioningly to institutions and how to exercise their critical thought only within narrow limits prescribed by the authorities. In fact, as long as a heavy preponderance of a nation's citizens are "good students" and are in some way rewarded for their performance, then dissenters and radical thinkers are no threat and can be permitted to express their opinions relatively unmolested. In the United States, free expression, to the extent that we have it, is a luxury commodity made available by the high standard of living and by the efficient functioning of such disguised forms of repression as schooling.

Schools preserve the status quo in two complementary ways: by molding the young and by screening them. Today almost all of the positions of relative power in the United States are reserved for those who have completed the full sixteen-year treatment, and perhaps a little more. Persons who are unwilling to have their minds and bodies pushed around incessantly are less likely to get through and therefore tend to be screened out of the power centers; the persons who do get through are more likely to accept things as they are and to make their own contributions in "safe" areas. Thus corporations and government agencies insist that executive trainees have a bachelor's degree, often without specifying any particular major. The degree, therefore, doesn't represent any particular body of knowledge. What *does* it represent? A certain mentality.

It is true, though, that an increasing number of rebels and freaks are getting through (as well as a much larger number of essentially adjusted students who try to have the best of two worlds by pretending that they are rebels and freaks). The small but noisy student rebellion of recent years has had the effect of bringing to campus a number of drop-ins--dissidents who would not otherwise be there. One friend of mine is an excellent example. He belonged to a Trotskyist youth group as a teenager but threw that over in 1963 because the civil rights movement seemed to be accomplishing more than his youth group was. He had

made a few futile attempts at college but realized that he had absolutely no interest in it and furthermore had no time for it. After a couple of years in Los Angeles, he disappeared into the Southern movement: Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia. For a while I lost track of him. Then, last year, I heard from him again; he had just enrolled in San Francisco State College--where the action is. He is typical of a growing minority of students; he may do more or less what's needed to stay in school but he is more than willing to risk being expelled or failed out (two years ago he was risking his life). It is unlikely that college will disarm him. -

As the tensions in our society work their way up to the surface, some overt rebellion appears in many settings; certainly it appears in schools, which offer at least a meeting place and staging ground for young middle- class rebels. May it grow in good health. But, as our college presidents are fond of pointing out, the great majority--the great silent majority--are there "not to make trouble but to get an education" (for "education," read "degree").

What about this majority? What is the mentality which employers depend upon our school system to deliver? What is most likely to emerge from the sixteen-year molding and screening process?

Well, a "good citizen" of sorts--isn't that the way they put it on report cards? Thoroughly schooled and ready for GE or IBM or the State Department, the graduate is a skilled, neat, disciplined worker with just enough initiative to carry out fairly complicated assignments but not so much initiative that he will seriously question the assignment itself. He is affably but fiercely competitive with his peers and he is submissive to his superiors. In fact, as long as he has some respect from his peers and subordinates, he is willing to be almost naked of dignity in the eyes of his superiors; there is very little shit he will not eat if there is something to be gained by it. In asserting himself he is moderate, even timid--except when he exercises the power of a great institution, when he himself is the superior, when he puts on some kind of real or figurative

uniform. At that point he is likely to assume the sacerdotal mask that his teachers wore. At that point--when he becomes official--his jaw hardens.

This college graduate is positively addicted to rules of all sorts at every level. In fact, should he help to form some club or group, it will probably have by-laws and officers and will follow parliamentary procedure. Even in games--cards, Monopoly, whatever--he is likely to have a passionate respect for the rules and to get bent out of shape if their sanctity is violated.

Ever since his gold-and-silver-star days he has been hooked on status and achievement symbol systems. He has a hunter's eye for the nuances of such systems in his work, in his leisure life and in the society at large. He carries a series of grade-point averages in his head and they rise or fall with an invitation to lunch, the purchase of a Triumph TR-2, a friendly punch on the arm from his ski instructor or the disrespectful attitude of a bank teller.

Since grade school, also, he has known how to become mildly enthusiastic about narrow choices without ever being tempted to venture rebelliously out of the field of choice assigned to him. His political world, for example, is peopled with Nixons and Humphreys; its frontiers are guarded by McCarthys and Reagans. He himself has had a taste of politics: he was elected sophomore class president in college on a platform that advocated extending snack-bar hours in the evening. Like Auden's "Unknown Citizen": when there is peace, he is for peace; when there is war, he goes. He doesn't expect a wide range to choose from in politics. His chief arena of choice is the marketplace, where he can choose enthusiastically among forty or fifty varieties of cigarette, without, incidentally, ever being tempted to choose the one variety that will turn him on. His drugs are still likely to be the orthodox ones, the consciousness-contractors: liquor, tranquilizers, a little TV.

He yearns for more free time but finds himself uncomfortable with very much of it. His vacations tend to be well structured. From time to time he feels oppressed and would like to "break out" but he isn't sure what that means. Leaving his family? Starting his own business? Buying a boat? He's not sure.

Let me stop at this point. There is, thank God, a limit to the meaningfulness of such a stereotyped characterization. It hits home in those areas where the college graduate has literally been stereotyped by his upbringing and by the rigid matrix of his schools. But it leaves out what makes him one individual, what makes him real. Doesn't he have a self beyond the stereotype? Isn't he unique--splendid--a center of existence? Isn't he, to use Timothy Leary's phrase, a two-billion-year-old carrier of the Light? Of course. But who sees it? His self has been scared into hiding. The stereotype that has been made of him hides his uniqueness, his inner life, his majesty from our eyes and, to a great extent from his own as well. He's got a sure A in Citizenship but he's failing in self-realization (a subject not too likely to appear in the curriculum).

Let's understand, when we consider this college graduate, that harm has been done not only to him but to society as well. There may, after all, be some of us who assume that dehumanization and standardization are no more than the price that an individual pays in return for a smoothly functioning society. But is that true? Is this man really what's good for society?

Social change is not just the radical's hang-up. It's a means of adaptation, of self preservation. Now, as our technology and our environment change with increasing rapidity, as we acquire ever more awesome resources and more bewildering problems, we need the capacity to recreate our society continually rather than be victimized by it. This, of course, is the sort of thing that gets said a great deal nowadays but what doesn't get said is that we will not meet this need for rebirth without

giving up what we now call schooling. A crisis in civilization--and we are in the midst of several--demands the radical thought, the radical will and the profound self-confidence which have been schooled out of our college-educated institutional man His narrow vision and his submissive conformity aren't good for society; they paralyze it. They are a curse on it.

(4) "THEY MAKE DEMOCRACY UNLIKELY."

Our schools make democracy unlikely because they rob the people, who are supposed to be sovereign, of their sense of power and of their ability to will meaningful institutional changes.

The democratic ideal--to which even the most conservative college trustees usually give lip service--means government of, by and for the people. It means power in the hands of the people. Our schools, however, remain less suited to this ideal than to an authoritarian society; they are more effective in teaching obedience than in fostering freedom Our textbooks may teach one kind of political system but the method by which our schools operate teaches another And the method wins out over the textbooks overwhelmingly. A more substantial degree of democracy will become likely only when we understand that political freedom is not merely a constitutional matter; it's also a state of mind, which can be either nurtured or blighted in school

I don't mean to ignore the reasons that already abound to explain that immense gap between our ideals of democracy and the system we see operating.

Some people, for example, argue that democracy only works well in small political units and that centralized democratic government of 200 million persons is just not possible. Others insist that the people are and will always remain too stupid and ill-informed to make political

decisions. Then there's the very persuasive socialist argument: democracy is just not compatible with capitalism. Even if you grant the socialist proposition, though, the question remains: is democracy compatible with socialism? I think it could be, more or less--but there are problems involved that are not normally recognized in this kind of analysis.

A socialist country where schooling is standardized and coercive might well, in time, develop an electorate as dismal as ours *even though* its constitution provided the most extensive political freedom for the individual and even though it had eliminated class exploitation in the traditional sense. In fact, the resources adhering to a powerful socialist government create a very special danger in this area. That's why the growing student power movement has the greatest importance politically. The more that political radicalism comes to include educational radicalism, the more nearly attainable democratic government will be.

Capitalist or socialist, a democracy cannot possibly function if its citizens are educated to be clever robots. The way to educate children for democracy is to let them do it--that doesn't mean allowing them to practice empty forms, to make pretend decisions or to vote on trivia; it means that they participate in the real decisions that affect them. You learn democracy in school not by defining it or by simulating it but by doing it.

If students and teachers ran their own schools, it would do more for democracy than all the government classes ever taught. But it would have to be just that: true participation in running the schools. Not those little make-believe student governments which govern in about the same way that baby's toy steering wheel drives daddy's car. Not even anything like those "faculty senates," which retain the right to create college policy as long as they don't abuse that right by exercising it.

Also, in considering the effect of schooling on democracy, it's wise to think not only about the overall academic decision-making process but also about day-to-day classroom experience as well. That's at the very heart of the problem. It's in the classroom where you learn that happiness is submission and where you grow used to authoritarianism and coercion. It's in the classroom where you learn how to follow orders mindlessly and how to surrender your sovereignty to an institution.

Incidentally, in discussing this question, I've often heard the objection that teachers legitimately possess authority by virtue of their knowledge and that, therefore, democracy is out of place in the classroom. This argument is a favorite with teachers, so it deserves some attention.

It's true that many teachers possess authority in one particular sense of the word but that does not entitle them to authority in every sense of the word. A teacher's authority rests in his special knowledge or ability, not in his power over students. I may be, say, an authority in ancient history but what has that to do with authority in the sense of a right to enforce obedience, to reward and punish? And the fact that I work for the state of California doesn't amplify my academic authority. If I'm sound in my analysis of Athenian society, the state of California adds nothing. If I'm all wrong, the state of California doesn't make me less wrong.

Democracy in school doesn't mean that a class votes on whether two and two make four, even though that seems to be the fear of some teachers. Suppose, for example, my entire history class insists that Rome fell because of its sexual laxity. Suppose we argue. I give my reasons and they give theirs. Then, in desperation, I try to impress them by detailing my academic background but they still insist that they're right. In this (unlikely) situation what relevance would grading have? What would it add to my true authority if I were able to pass, fail, expel, what have you? My value to a class is that I can be of some kind of assistance to them. What they make of it is up to them. I'm a teacher not a cop. (One counter-argument might be that the authority to pass and fail is

necessary, not to coerce knowledge, but to determine a student's fitness to enter a given field or profession. For a discussion of this question and of grading in general, "A Young Person's Guide to the Grading System.") Democracy in school doesn't mean that we vote on what's true; it means that education isn't anything which is *done to* somebody.

(5) "AUTHORITY ADDICTS"

It's time to say a few kind words about our coercive schools. They do--more or less--solve an existential problem. They shape time for us and thus give some meaning, if not to our life, then at least to some segments of it. Do you know what I mean? You study off and on for a final exam, slowly building tension as the date approaches. The night before, you get no sleep; you're in a strange world of glaring lights, notes, coffee cups, piled up books. Whatever other worries you might have are suspended. This task takes precedence; it's something to hold on to. When you approach the classroom, your exhaustion disappears in a fresh wave of tension and nervous energy. This all has to be important, has to be meaningful; anything you stay up all night for and get this worked up about has to mean something. And when you finish the bluebooks, they rest substantial on your desk. It wasn't all a dream; you've got the bluebooks and, eventually, the grade to prove it.

Courses may be pointless and uninteresting. The data may go through you like mineral oil. But at least it is some kind of challenge. And while you're involved in all this, time is off *your* hands and rests in *theirs*--the authorities'. Should you not be attending school, you may feel that you're pissing away time--days and weeks; you may begin to feel very uncomfortable. On your own, you have to face the responsibility for how you spend time. But in school you don't. What they make you do may obviously be a waste but at least the responsibility isn't charged to your account. School in this respect is, once again, like the army or jail. Once

you're in, you may have all kinds of problems but freedom isn't one of them.

After you leave school and get a job, you'll find you need the job just as you learned to need school. You'll remain an existential minor who needs trustees to spend his time for him.

The schools we have are a cop-out. Why not face the responsibility for what we do with our time? And if we need structures to inform our time, why not find more congenial, more human ones. Why not surround ourselves with tailor-made educational structures rather than torture ourselves to fit the Procrustean set-up we have now.

Besides, things are changing. The leisure-time explosion is removing even the solace of constant work. Leisure calls on the ability to accept autonomy, to be content with internal justification for what you do. The more leisure we have, the more we need to be able to perceive our own needs and then to follow them for no other reason than that we want to.

So where are we headed? Are we going to face the existential problem or run from it? Will we let time fall on our very own hands without trying to kill it. Or will we continue to look for authorities to take the burden of our freedom from us. As we free ourselves from work in the traditional sense, we have the opportunity to lift our heads up and to look around; we become more free to create our lives rather than undergo them.

Drugs, by the way, have some relationship both to school and to the increase in leisure time. A growing number of people have found that smoking a little weed helps them to appreciate the possibilities of unstructured, uninstitutionalized time. Acid and the other psychedelic drugs typically open up possibilities beyond school and beyond the job (dropping out is always dropping in to something else). The educational reform movement probably owes a good deal to students and teachers

whose drug experiences have made them impatient with the miserable use that schools make of their time.

(6) "IF IT WEREN'T COMPULSORY..."

If we want our children locked up all day until they're sixteen, let's at least be honest about it and stop trying to pass imprisonment off as education.

Say, for example, that a mother and father would like their eight-year-old boy out of the house all day and also off the streets. Then I guess they will want there to be some place for him to go. Call it a youth center, a postgraduate nursery or a daytime internment camp. But why does it have to be a school? It should have plenty of room and lots of variety: places to be alone if you want, places to play games if you want, places to build things, and places to learn how to read and do sums--*if you want*.

Learning isn't a duty that we must be flogged into performing; it's our birthright, our very human specialty and joy. Places to learn are everywhere. So are reasons to learn. All we need, occasionally, is a little help from our friends.

We don't need compulsory schooling to force us to read. There are good reasons to read and things all around us that want to be read. And if someone should choose to pass his life illiterate, there are other communications media accessible to him. He'll probably make out fine. He may even be able to teach the rest of us some things that print hides.

It would be well if we stopped lying to ourselves about what compulsory schooling does for our children. It temporarily imprisons them; it standardizes them; it intimidates them. If that's what we want, we should admit it.

There's not much point in going on about this. If you've somehow missed reading A.S. Neill's *Summerhill*, you ought to go out and get it.

Incidentally, with compulsory schooling eliminated, there is no reason to assume that most parents will send their children to public internment centers during the day, or that learning itself will be as dependent upon public institutions as it now is. With compulsory education and all the related red tape out of the way, small groups of parents should be able to make their own arrangements to care for their children and even to satisfy the children's desire to learn. Some areas of learning--nuclear physics, for example--require heavy financial support. But many other areas do not; they provide opportunities for those who want to learn or teach to bypass official institutions. Furthermore, advances in computers, in information retrieval and in communication should soon make it much easier and cheaper than it is now to learn outside of public schools. Technological developments should, before long, give a home resources that are presently available only to a large and well-funded school. Sooner or later, if a child (or adult) wants to learn more about, say, snakes or jet engines, he should be able to tune in, at home, to books, films, learning computers and so on, which he can use as much or as little as he wants. Naturally, if the child chooses not to use the computers and books, that should be his unrestricted right. What I'm getting at is that parents should, before long, be able to develop a formidable alternative to our system of compulsory public elementary schools. As for older children-- adolescents--the whole matter is less a parental responsibility and more their own.

(7) "IF SCHOOLS WERE AUTONOMOUS AND WERE RUN BY THE PEOPLE: IN THEM . . ."

Learning is not something that is done to you.

Suppose we agree that there must be something better than our schools, something better suited to our human potential, our political ideals and our accelerating technology. What then? It is exactly at this point that there is a temptation to make what I believe is the basic educational blunder: Having tried and convicted the present educational system, one then works out in detail his own educational utopia--setting up a blueprint that covers matters such as curriculum, textbooks, administration policy, student-teacher ratio, classroom construction and so on.

From my point of view, however, a good school can't be described very clearly in advance because one essential characteristic of a good school is the *freedom to establish its own direction*. In fact, there may not even *be* such a thing as a good school within our present conception of what "school" means.

To say that learning is not something that is done to you has meaning on more than one level. With respect to the school as a whole, it means autonomy. There should be no dictatorial governing board or other body above the school making its decisions for it. If we are going to continue our policy of public education, this means that the people and their elected representatives will have to accept a new and radical policy: that they must pay for schools without controlling them. What happens, therefore, on a state university campus or on a junior high school campus would be decided neither by the legislature nor by the governor nor by any board of regents or board of education nor by any chancellor or superintendent of schools but only by the persons participating in the school itself. It is true that there would be a kind of power implicit in the fact that the state or community could refuse to pay for the school or could reduce its funds. But that would be the limit. To the extent that a state or city wanted to have a school, it would have to pay for it and leave it alone. Hopefully, the idea of an externally controlled school will in time become a contradiction in terms.

Autonomy in schools would almost certainly create much greater diversity--something that should be very good for us as individuals and as a society. As it is, almost all of our schools, at any given level, are amazingly alike. Given the way they are governed, this is not surprising. But what if schools were autonomous? Naturally there would be standardizing forces. The overall needs of society--the proliferating communications networks--a considerable degree of cultural cohesion--these would tend to restrain diversity in schools. But still, if schools were autonomous, they would show much more variety than they do now. Schooling arrangements in a given neighborhood would more closely reflect the character of the neighborhood. The country's colleges would offer a much wider and more interesting choice. There would be more experimentation and consequently a greater opportunity for one school to learn from the varied experiences of others. Schools might, in fact, begin to look more like a free enterprise system--but an educational rather than an economic one (free enterprise has always made much more sense to me in connection with the production of ideas than with the production of automobiles).

Also, if schools were autonomous, I would expect our rigid system of educational levels to weaken. There might well be large centers where persons of all ages would learn from each other and where the structural divisions would be based on areas of learning rather than on age. School might emerge less as a molding and screening process that usurps the first third of a person's life than as a continuing opportunity for certain kinds of learning and group activity.

Ideas about curriculum would also become much less rigid, since curriculum would be determined not by centralized authority but by the learners' and teachers' own awareness of what is relevant and necessary to them and their society. On one campus you might find a curriculum in light; on another a school of ecstatic pharmacology. Radical movements would develop through schools, not against them. The departmental

concept would probably fade. The concept of "curriculum" itself would perhaps become dated.

It's not my intention to predict everything that would result from autonomy in schools. My basic point is simply that autonomy is necessary if we want schools to become places where you can learn without being deadened and intimidated in the process and where adaptive social change is fostered rather than prevented.

To say that learning is not something that is done to you implies the need for more than just autonomy. *Within* the school it means that everyone must have a voice in the decisions that affect him. This kind of arrangement--democracy--doesn't eliminate discord but it does put the responsibility for a school on all of the people in it.

I can't see any reason why either students or teachers should be shut out of the decision-making process. In fact, the supposed conflict between students and teachers doesn't itself seem to be a basic one; it arises rather out of the coercive and judgmental powers that have been held by teachers and out of the slave role that has been forced on students. In an autonomous and noncoercive school, I would expect most disagreements to cut across this tenuous boundary in other directions.

I hesitate to go on about students and teachers. The very categories need to be questioned. The most meaningful distinction may be no more than an economic one: who gets paid for what he does? And when we all get paid for what we do, that distinction will disappear. Suppose that today I teach gymnastics, tomorrow I study Arabic and the next day I participate in an encounter group. In which category do I belong?

Administrator is still another term. Right now it's in bad repute with many of us because administrators are there to do the bidding of some external authority. In an autonomous and democratic school, administration would just be people running their own school. A high

school administrator for example, could be either a student or a teacher; he would be more or less a blackboard monitor on a somewhat larger scale. But this category also would be blurred at the very least.

To prevent education from being victimization, it will not be enough to have autonomy and democracy for the school as a whole. One would also want individual groups within a school to be free to develop their own learning structures without being pushed around and standardized by some central administration. However, I want to avoid falling into the trap I described earlier; I want to avoid trying to blueprint an educational utopia in advance. Self-government in practice cannot help but fall short of an ideal and therefore admits of endless approaches. If schools can serve as workshops in self-government, it will be both likely and valuable that they be diverse in this respect.

If schools are free, some of them may choose to renounce a part of their freedom. There may be students who prefer to be dictated to. For all I know there may always be students who want to be graded daily and threatened with probation, dismissal and so on, just as there may always be persons who want to be flogged and will no doubt always find other persons willing to do it. It is certainly not my wish to prevent them.

The freedom I talk about, incidentally, is not merely a matter of "academic" freedom. Schools are not just learning places but communities as well. Many schools are communities in the full sense of the word: people don't just go to them; they live in them. And, in the future, the distinction between "school" and "community" is likely to be much vaguer than it is now. Rochdale, for example, in Toronto, may be a sign of what is to come.

Rochdale is a number of things. To begin with, it's a new 18-story building. The people who live and pay rent in it own it and run it. For some of them it's a very loosely structured place to learn--a sort of experimental college. For others it's just a place to live. There are,

furthermore, people who participate in educational activities of Rochdale but who don't live there. Rochdale is also a continuing problem--a place where there is no one to blame things on, where people have to improvise their own structures and to decide what to do with their freedom. Here is a paragraph, titled "The Secret," from one of their pamphlets:

The secret of dealing with the confusion and uncertainty of Rochdale is to use "we" in place of "they" when referring to the operations of the College. For example, say "what we are going to do with the 17th floor terrace" rather than "what are they going to do, etc." This simple trick clarifies many otherwise ambiguous problems and helps eliminate flatulence.

I hope Rochdale thrives. And even more I hope the idea spreads. If you're interested in free schools, you ought to read a beautiful essay by Dennis Lee, "Getting To Rochdale," in "The University Game" (Toronto, 1968). The essay originally appeared in "This Magazine is about Schools" (Winter, 1968).

(8) "THE POWER TO SAY 'NO'"

The people who control colleges are fond of pointing out to students that higher education is a privilege. The implication is that if they don't behave, the privilege will be withdrawn. Similarly, in high school the ultimate threat is expulsion. School is supposed to be some kind of favor that society grants you. The condition for continuing to receive this favor is that you accept it on society's terms.

Sweat shop owners used to tell their workers more or less the same thing. It's astonishing that workers swallowed that line for so long. And it's equally astonishing that most students continue to see schooling as a privilege rather than as a transaction in which they happen to be getting a rotten deal.

When you go to school, you do society an enormous favor; you give it the opportunity to mold you in its image, stunting and deadening you in the process. What you get in return is access to a certain income bracket and the material comforts that go with it. But think what you've given up. Other animals have much of their nature born in them. But you were born with the freedom to learn, to change, to transcend yourself, to create your life that's your human birthright. In school you sell it very cheap.

I have already tried (in Notes 3 and 4) to show that this rotten bargain isn't even good for society, that it forestalls necessary social change. Unfortunately, the dying part of society, which controls schooling, is also the part least likely to understand the need for profound change. It is the students--the not entirely socialized--who most feel the need for change and who, in trying to transform the society in which they live, become the victims of its self-protective rage.

The power that students have is simply the power not to be students, to refuse a bad bargain, as workers have frequently done--to say "no." If students have power, it is because they have something society needs very badly. Student power is made possible by the dying society's need to remain alive--to preserve itself through its children. Think how our institutions feed On the unformed future. Think even how individuals--those aging businessmen on a college board of trustees --clutch at immortality by putting their trip on the young. Society needs students to retain its identity; they are the only future it has. For this reason, students can demand freedom from exploitation and can get that freedom. They can insist that the continuity they provide society be one that is achieved through rebirth rather than through petrification.

There are a multitude of approaches that students can take toward changing schools. But the one that offers the most hope is the strike or boycott. It is more than a gesture, more than a pressure tactic. It cuts right to the heart of the problem. It refuses a bad bargain; it puts the

future on strike. Requests can be denied or put off. Demonstrations can be broken up and the protesters put in jail. But a strike is not really vulnerable to force. When Governor Reagan of California recently promised to keep San Francisco State College open at the point of a bayonet if need be, he failed to understand both the limitations of the bayonet and the power of the student revolution.

High school students are in a more difficult position but this has not stopped them from beginning to use boycotts as well as other forms of noncooperation in order to change their schools. A few high school troublemakers can be expelled or disciplined in other ways. But what does it mean to expel most of the students in a school--especially when you've already compelled them to be there? Also, because these students are so regimented and because they are actually compelled to attend, a high school strike, though very difficult to bring about, is an even more dramatic and powerful action than is a college strike.

I have not yet said anything about the possibility of faculty-student cooperation in changing the nature of school. Such cooperation is difficult; most faculty members are still very much caught up in their roles and, even though they have their own reasons to want to change things, are reluctant to make common cause with students. Faculty, furthermore, are very hesitant to engage in the kind of forceful actions that might endanger their jobs or even their chances for promotion, tenure and so on. Still, there are enough instances of student-faculty cooperation to keep this an important possibility even at present. In order, though, for such cooperation to advance rather than impede student progress, it is essential that students don't wait around for faculty support and that they don't allow professorial timidity to rub off on them.

The American Federation of Teachers represents a relatively militant segment of faculty; they have shown themselves, at San Francisco State in particular, to be a possible ally for the student movement. But it must be remembered that the AFT chose to join the students in striking at S.F.

State in great part because it was an excellent opportunity to push their own drive for collective bargaining. AFT militancy--to the extent that they possess it--is directed toward rather limited goals. It would be a mistake to assume that the majority of AFT members, in high school or college, are stalwart supporters of the student liberation movement or even that they understand it.

In the long run, if students and teachers can outgrow their feudal relationship, they do indeed have a common cause: the freeing of schools from domination by outside forces. Perhaps the best thing students can do with respect to faculty is, first of all, to emphasize that common cause and to fully support faculty moves for greater self determination and, second, to work ceaselessly to educate teachers, to show them what's lacking in school as it is and to show them what education could be.