

# AGAINST SCHOOLS & THE TYRANNY OF COMPULSORY SCHOOLING



John Taylor Gatto

## Introduction

John Taylor Gatto is one of the more widely-recognized and well-known voices in the ever-expanding chorus of homeschoolers and unschoolers, reformists and radicals calling for the abolition of obligatory schooling, the freeing of children's lives and minds. This zine combines two of Gatto's articles, and was put together in hopes of introducing the concept of unschooling to radical folks who don't yet know there are alternatives to forced schooling, and in hopes of changing the minds of those radicals who still believe such schooling is a suitable system of education for ourselves and our children.

Gatto himself is most definitely not the only prominent figurehead of the unschooling movement. His writings and speeches were chosen as the focus of this zine mainly because there's a wealth of free and easily plagiarized Gatto material on the internet. However, to provide the reader greater access to the ideas and arguments fueling the unschooling movement, a list of other free resources (including writings by other famed anti-school activists) can be found at the end of this publication.

Bear in mind when reading the following that John Gatto is not himself an anarchist. Politically, he can probably best be described as a libertarian. He's a bit of a patriot, with full faith in and respect for the founding fathers of the U.S. and their absurd documents. So, although his critique of modern pedagogy is radical, some of the things he says and writes are far from it. Despite his libertarian leanings, his criticisms of schooling are still essential to radical struggles, especially the struggle that is radical parenting.

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## Against Schools!!!

### How public education cripples our kids, and why *Harper's Magazine, 2003*

I taught for thirty years in some of the worst schools in Manhattan, and in some of the best, and during that time I became an expert in boredom. Boredom was everywhere in my world, and if you asked the kids, as I often did, why they felt so bored, they always gave the same answers: they said the work was stupid, that it made no sense, that they already knew it. They said they wanted to be doing something real, not just sitting around. They said teachers didn't seem to know much about their subjects and clearly weren't interested in learning more. And the kids were right: their teachers were every bit as bored as they were.

Boredom is the common condition of schoolteachers, and anyone who has spent time in a teachers' lounge can vouch for the low energy, the whining, the dispirited attitudes, to be found there. When asked why they feel bored, the teachers tend to blame the kids, as you might expect. Who wouldn't get bored teaching students who are rude and interested only in grades? If even that. Of course, teachers are themselves products of the same twelve-year compulsory school programs that so thoroughly bore their students, and as school personnel they are trapped inside structures even more rigid than those imposed upon the children. Who, then, is to blame?

We all are. My grandfather taught me that. One afternoon when I was seven I complained to him of boredom, and he batted me hard on the head. He told me that I was never to use that term in his presence again, that if I was bored it was my fault and no one else's. The obligation to amuse and instruct myself was entirely my own, and people who didn't know that were childish people, to be avoided if possible. Certainly not to be trusted. That episode cured me of boredom forever, and here and there over the years I was able to pass on the lesson to some remarkable student. For the most part, however, I found it futile to challenge the official notion that boredom and childishness were the natural state of affairs in the classroom. Often I had to defy custom, and even bend the law, to help kids break out of this trap.

The empire struck back, of course; childish adults regularly conflate opposition with disloyalty. I once returned from a medical leave to discover that all evidence of my having been granted the leave had been purposely destroyed, that my job had been terminated, and that I no longer possessed even a teaching license. After nine months of tormented effort I was able to retrieve the license when a school secretary testified to witnessing the plot unfold. In the meantime my family suffered more than I care to remember. By the time I finally retired in 1991, I had more than enough reason to think of our schools - with their long-term, cell-block-style, forced confinement of both students and teachers - as virtual factories of childishness. Yet I honestly could not see why they had to be that way. My own experience had revealed to me what many other teachers must learn along the way, too, yet keep to themselves for fear of reprisal: if we wanted to we could easily and inexpensively jettison the old, stupid structures and help kids take an education rather than merely receive a schooling. We could encourage the best qualities of youthfulness - curiosity, adventure, resilience, the capacity for surprising insight - simply by being more flexible about time, texts, and tests, by introducing kids to truly competent adults, and by giving each student what autonomy he or she needs in order to take a risk every now and then.

But we don't do that. And the more I asked why not, and persisted in thinking about the "problem" of schooling as an engineer might, the more I missed the point: What if there is no "problem" with our schools? What if they are the way they are, so expensively flying in the face of common sense and long experience in how children learn things, not because they are doing something wrong but because they are doing something right? Is it possible that George W. Bush accidentally spoke the truth when he said we would "leave no child behind"? Could it be that our schools are designed to make sure not one of them ever really grows up?

Do we really need school? I don't mean education, just forced schooling: six classes a day, five days a week, nine months a year, for twelve years. Is this deadly routine really necessary? And if so, for what? Don't hide behind reading, writing, and arithmetic as a rationale, because 2 million happy homeschoolers have surely put that banal justification to rest. Even if they hadn't, a considerable number of well-known Americans never went through the twelve-year wringer our kids currently go through, and they turned out all right. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln? Someone taught them, to be sure, but they were not products of a school system, and not one of them was ever

"graduated" from a secondary school. Throughout most of American history, kids generally didn't go to high school, yet the unschooled rose to be admirals, like Farragut; inventors, like Edison; captains of industry, like Carnegie and Rockefeller; writers, like Melville and Twain and Conrad; and even scholars, like Margaret Mead. In fact, until pretty recently people who reached the age of thirteen weren't looked upon as children at all. Ariel Durant, who co-wrote an enormous, and very good, multivolume history of the world with her husband, Will, was happily married at fifteen, and who could reasonably claim that Ariel Durant was an uneducated person? Unschooled, perhaps, but not uneducated.

We have been taught (that is, schooled) in this country to think of "success" as synonymous with, or at least dependent upon, "schooling," but historically that isn't true in either an intellectual or a financial sense. And plenty of people throughout the world today find a way to educate themselves without resorting to a system of compulsory secondary schools that all too often resemble prisons. Why, then, do Americans confuse education with just such a system? What exactly is the purpose of our public schools?

Mass schooling of a compulsory nature really got its teeth into the United States between 1905 and 1915, though it was conceived of much earlier and pushed for throughout most of the nineteenth century. The reason given for this enormous upheaval of family life and cultural traditions was, roughly speaking, threefold:

1. To make good people.
2. To make good citizens.
3. To make each person his or her personal best.

These goals are still trotted out today on a regular basis, and most of us accept them in one form or another as a decent definition of public education's mission, however short schools actually fall in achieving them. But we are dead wrong. Compounding our error is the fact that the national literature holds numerous and surprisingly consistent statements of compulsory schooling's true purpose. We have, for example, the great H. L. Mencken, who wrote in *The American Mercury* for April 1924 that the aim of public education is not

"to fill the young of the species with knowledge and awaken their intelligence. . . . Nothing could be further from the truth. The aim. . . is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to

breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality. That is its aim in the United States . . . and that is its aim everywhere else."

Because of Mencken's reputation as a satirist, we might be tempted to dismiss this passage as a bit of hyperbolic sarcasm. His article, however, goes on to trace the template for our own educational system back to the now vanished, though never to be forgotten, military state of Prussia. And although he was certainly aware of the irony that we had recently been at war with Germany, the heir to Prussian thought and culture, Mencken was being perfectly serious here. Our educational system really is Prussian in origin, and that really is cause for concern.

The odd fact of a Prussian provenance for our schools pops up again and again once you know to look for it. William James alluded to it many times at the turn of the century. Orestes Brownson, the hero of Christopher Lasch's 1991 book, *The True and Only Heaven*, was publicly denouncing the Prussianization of American schools back in the 1840s. Horace Mann's "Seventh Annual Report" to the Massachusetts State Board of Education in 1843 is essentially a paean to the land of Frederick the Great and a call for its schooling to be brought here. That Prussian culture loomed large in America is hardly surprising, given our early association with that utopian state. A Prussian served as Washington's aide during the Revolutionary War, and so many German-speaking people had settled here by 1795 that Congress considered publishing a German-language edition of the federal laws. But what shocks is that we should so eagerly have adopted one of the very worst aspects of Prussian culture: an educational system deliberately designed to produce mediocre intellects, to hamstring the inner life, to deny students appreciable leadership skills, and to ensure docile and incomplete citizens - all in order to render the populace "manageable."

It was from James Bryant Conant - president of Harvard for twenty years, WWI poison-gas specialist, WWII executive on the atomic-bomb project, high commissioner of the American zone in Germany after WWII, and truly one of the most influential figures of the twentieth century - that I first got wind of the real purposes of American schooling. Without Conant, we would probably not have the same style and degree of standardized testing that we enjoy today, nor would we be blessed with gargantuan high schools that warehouse 2,000 to 4,000 students at a time, like the famous Columbine High in Littleton, Colorado. Shortly after

I retired from teaching I picked up Conant's 1959 book-length essay, *The Child the Parent and the State*, and was more than a little intrigued to see him mention in passing that the modern schools we attend were the result of a "revolution" engineered between 1905 and 1930. A revolution? He declines to elaborate, but he does direct the curious and the uninformed to Alexander Inglis's 1918 book, *Principles of Secondary Education*, in which "one saw this revolution through the eyes of a revolutionary."

Inglis, for whom a lecture in education at Harvard is named, makes it perfectly clear that compulsory schooling on this continent was intended to be just what it had been for Prussia in the 1820s: a fifth column into the burgeoning democratic movement that threatened to give the peasants and the proletarians a voice at the bargaining table. Modern, industrialized, compulsory schooling was to make a sort of surgical incision into the prospective unity of these underclasses. Divide children by subject, by age-grading, by constant rankings on tests, and by many other more subtle means, and it was unlikely that the ignorant mass of mankind, separated in childhood, would ever reintegrate into a dangerous whole.

Inglis breaks down the purpose - the actual purpose - of modern schooling into six basic functions, any one of which is enough to curl the hair of those innocent enough to believe the three traditional goals listed earlier:

1. The adjustive or adaptive function. Schools are to establish fixed habits of reaction to authority. This, of course, precludes critical judgment completely. It also pretty much destroys the idea that useful or interesting material should be taught, because you can't test for reflexive obedience until you know whether you can make kids learn, and do, foolish and boring things.
2. The integrating function. This might well be called "the conformity function," because its intention is to make children as alike as possible. People who conform are predictable, and this is of great use to those who wish to harness and manipulate a large labor force.

3. The diagnostic and directive function. School is meant to determine each student's proper social role. This is done by logging evidence mathematically and anecdotally on cumulative records. As in "your permanent record." Yes, you do have one.
4. The differentiating function. Once their social role has been "diagnosed," children are to be sorted by role and trained only so far as their destination in the social machine merits - and not one step further. So much for making kids their personal best.
5. The selective function. This refers not to human choice at all but to Darwin's theory of natural selection as applied to what he called "the favored races." In short, the idea is to help things along by consciously attempting to improve the breeding stock. Schools are meant to tag the unfit - with poor grades, remedial placement, and other punishments - clearly enough that their peers will accept them as inferior and effectively bar them from the reproductive sweepstakes. That's what all those little humiliations from first grade onward were intended to do: wash the dirt down the drain.
6. The propaedeutic function. The societal system implied by these rules will require an elite group of caretakers. To that end, a small fraction of the kids will quietly be taught how to manage this continuing project, how to watch over and control a population deliberately dumbed down and declawed in order that government might proceed unchallenged and corporations might never want for obedient labor.

That, unfortunately, is the purpose of mandatory public education in this country. And lest you take Inglis for an isolated crank with a rather too cynical take on the educational enterprise, you should know that he was hardly alone in championing these ideas. Conant himself, building on the ideas of Horace Mann and others, campaigned tirelessly for an American school system designed along the same lines. Men like George Peabody, who funded the cause of mandatory schooling throughout the South, surely understood that the Prussian system was useful in creating not only a harmless electorate and a servile labor force but also a virtual herd of mindless consumers. In time a great number of industrial titans came to recognize the enormous profits to be had by cultivating and tending

just such a herd via public education, among them Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller.

There you have it. Now you know. We don't need Karl Marx's conception of a grand warfare between the classes to see that it is in the interest of complex management, economic or political, to dumb people down, to demoralize them, to divide them from one another, and to discard them if they don't conform. Class may frame the proposition, as when Woodrow Wilson, then president of Princeton University, said the following to the New York City School Teachers Association in 1909: "We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class, of necessity, in every society, to forgo the privileges of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks." But the motives behind the disgusting decisions that bring about these ends need not be class-based at all. They can stem purely from fear, or from the by now familiar belief that "efficiency" is the paramount virtue, rather than love, liberty, laughter, or hope. Above all, they can stem from simple greed.

There were vast fortunes to be made, after all, in an economy based on mass production and organized to favor the large corporation rather than the small business or the family farm. But mass production required mass consumption, and at the turn of the twentieth century most Americans considered it both unnatural and unwise to buy things they didn't actually need. Mandatory schooling was a godsend on that count. School didn't have to train kids in any direct sense to think they should consume nonstop, because it did something even better: it encouraged them not to think at all. And that left them sitting ducks for another great invention of the modern era – marketing.

Now, you needn't have studied marketing to know that there are two groups of people who can always be convinced to consume more than they need to: addicts and children. School has done a pretty good job of turning our children into addicts, but it has done a spectacular job of turning our children into children. Again, this is no accident. Theorists from Plato to Rousseau to our own Dr. Inglis knew that if children could be cloistered with other children, stripped of responsibility and independence, encouraged to develop only the trivializing emotions of greed, envy, jealousy, and fear, they would grow older but never truly grow up. In the 1934 edition of his once well-known book *Public Education in the United States*, Ellwood P. Cubberley detailed and praised

the way the strategy of successive school enlargements had extended childhood by two to six years, and forced schooling was at that point still quite new. This same Cubberley - who was dean of Stanford's School of Education, a textbook editor at Houghton Mifflin, and Conant's friend and correspondent at Harvard - had written the following in the 1922 edition of his book *Public School Administration*: "Our schools are . . . factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned. . . . And it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down."

It's perfectly obvious from our society today what those specifications were. Maturity has by now been banished from nearly every aspect of our lives. Easy divorce laws have removed the need to work at relationships; easy credit has removed the need for fiscal self-control; easy entertainment has removed the need to learn to entertain oneself; easy answers have removed the need to ask questions. We have become a nation of children, happy to surrender our judgments and our wills to political exhortations and commercial blandishments that would insult actual adults. We buy televisions, and then we buy the things we see on the television. We buy computers, and then we buy the things we see on the computer. We buy \$150 sneakers whether we need them or not, and when they fall apart too soon we buy another pair. We drive SUVs and believe the lie that they constitute a kind of life insurance, even when we're upside-down in them. And, worst of all, we don't bat an eye when Ari Fleischer tells us to "be careful what you say," even if we remember having been told somewhere back in school that America is the land of the free. We simply buy that one too. Our schooling, as intended, has seen to it.

Now for the good news. Once you understand the logic behind modern schooling, its tricks and traps are fairly easy to avoid. School trains children to be employees and consumers; teach your own to be leaders and adventurers. School trains children to obey reflexively; teach your own to think critically and independently. Well-schooled kids have a low threshold for boredom; help your own to develop an inner life so that they'll never be bored. Urge them to take on the serious material, the grown-up material, in history, literature, philosophy, music, art, economics, theology - all the stuff schoolteachers know well enough to avoid. Challenge your kids with plenty of solitude so that they can learn to enjoy their own company, to conduct inner dialogues. Well-schooled people are conditioned to dread being alone, and they seek constant

companionship through the TV, the computer, the cell phone, and through shallow friendships quickly acquired and quickly abandoned. Your children should have a more meaningful life, and they can.

First, though, we must wake up to what our schools really are: laboratories of experimentation on young minds, drill centers for the habits and attitudes that corporate society demands. Mandatory education serves children only incidentally; its real purpose is to turn them into servants. Don't let your own have their childhoods extended, not even for a day. If David Farragut could take command of a captured British warship as a preteen, if Thomas Edison could publish a broadsheet at the age of twelve, if Ben Franklin could apprentice himself to a printer at the same age (then put himself through a course of study that would choke a Yale senior today), there's no telling what your own kids could do. After a long life, and thirty years in the public school trenches, I've concluded that genius is as common as dirt. We suppress our genius only because we haven't yet figured out how to manage a population of educated men and women. The solution, I think, is simple and glorious. Let them manage themselves.



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## The Tyranny Of Compulsory Schooling

*The Sun, 2005*

Let me speak to you about dumbness because that is what schools teach best. Old-fashioned dumbness used to be simple ignorance: you didn't know something, but there were ways to find out if you wanted to. Government-controlled schooling didn't eliminate dumbness - in fact, we now know that people read more fluently before we had forced schooling - but dumbness was transformed.

Now dumb people aren't just ignorant; they're the victims of the non-thought of secondhand ideas. Dumb people are now well-informed about the opinions of Time magazine and CBS, The New York Times and the President; their job is to choose which pre-thought thoughts, which received opinions, they like best. The elite in this new empire of ignorance are those who know the most pre-thought thoughts.

Mass dumbness is vital to modern society. The dumb person is wonderfully flexible clay for psychological shaping by market research, government policymakers; public-opinion leaders, and any other interest group. The more pre-thought thoughts a person has memorized, the easier it is to predict what choices he or she will make. What dumb people cannot do is think for themselves or ever be alone for very long without feeling crazy. That is the whole point of national forced schooling; we aren't supposed to be able to think for ourselves because independent thinking gets in the way of "professional" thinking, which is believed to follow rules of scientific precision.

Modern scientific stupidity masquerades as intellectual knowledge - which it is not. Real knowledge has to be earned by hard and painful thinking; it can't be generated in group discussions or group therapies but only in lonely sessions with yourself. Real knowledge is earned only by ceaseless questioning of yourself and others, and by the labor of independent verification; you can't buy it from a government agent, a social worker, a psychologist, a licensed specialist, or a schoolteacher. There isn't a public school in this country set up to allow the discovery of real knowledge - not even the best ones - although here and there individual teachers, like guerrilla fighters, sabotage the system and work toward this ideal. But since schools are set up to classify people rather than to see them as unique, even the best schoolteachers are strictly limited in the amount of

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questioning they can tolerate.

The new dumbness - the non thought of received ideas - is much more dangerous than simple ignorance, because it's really about thought control. In school, a washing away of the innate power of individual mind takes place, a "cleansing" so comprehensive that original thinking becomes difficult. If you don't believe this development was part of the intentional design of schooling, you should read William Torrey Harris's *The Philosophy of Education*. Harris was the U.S. Commissioner of Education at the turn of the century and the man most influential in standardizing our schools. Listen to the man.

"Ninety-nine [students] out of a hundred," writes Harris, "are automata, careful to walk in prescribed paths, careful to follow the prescribed custom." This is not all accident, Harris explains, but the "result of substantial education, which, scientifically defined, is the subsumption of the individual." Scientific education subsumes the individual until his or her behavior becomes robotic. Those are the thoughts of the most influential U.S. Commissioner of Education we've had so far.

The great theological scholar Dietrich Bonhoeffer raised this issue of the new dumbness in his brilliant analysis of Nazism, in which he sought to comprehend how the best-schooled nation in the world, Germany, could fall under its sway. He concluded that Nazism could be understood only as the psychological product of good schooling. The sheer weight of received ideas, pre-thought thoughts, was so overwhelming that individuals gave up trying to assess things for themselves. Why struggle to invent a map of the world or of the human conscience when schools and media offer thousands of ready-made maps, pre-thought thoughts?

The new dumbness is particularly deadly to middle and upper-middle-class people, who have already been made shallow by the multiple requirements to conform. Too many people, uneasily convinced that they must know something because of a degree, diploma, or license, remain so convinced until a brutal divorce, alienation from their children, loss of employment, or periodic fits of meaninglessness manage to tip the precarious mental balance of their incomplete humanity, their stillborn adult lives.

Listen to William Harris again, the dark genius of American schooling, the man who gave you scientifically age-graded classrooms:

"The great purposes of school can be realized better in dark, airless, ugly places than in beautiful halls. It is to master the physical self, to transcend the beauty of nature. School should develop the power to withdraw from the external world."

Harris thought, a hundred years ago, that self-alienation was the key to a successful society. Filling the young mind with the thoughts of others and surrounding it with ugliness - that was the passport to self-alienation. Who can say that he was wrong?

As long as we're questioning public schooling, we should question whether there really is an abstraction called "the public" at all, except in the ominous calculations of social engineers. As a boy from the banks of the Monongahela River in western Pennsylvania, I find the term insulting, a cartoon of social reality. If an institution that robs people of their right to self-determination can call itself "public", if being "public" means it can turn families into agents of the state, making parents spy on and harass their sons and daughters because a schoolteacher tells them to; if the state can steal your home because you can't pay its "public" school taxes, and state courts can break up your family if you refuse to allow the state to tell your children what to think - then the word public is a label for garbage and for people who allow themselves to be treated like slaves.

A few weeks is all that the Shelter Institute asks for to give you a beautiful Cape Cod home; a few months is all Maine Maritime asks for to teach you boat-building and rope-making, lobstering and sail-making, fishing and naval architecture. We have too much schooling, not too little. Hong Kong, with its short school year, whips Japan in every scientific or mathematical competition. Israel, with its long school year, can't keep up with Flemish Belgium, which has the shortest school year in the world.

Somebody's been lying to you. Sweden, a rich, healthy, and beautiful country, with a spectacular reputation for quality in everything, won't allow children to enter school before they're seven years old. The total length of Swedish schooling is nine years, not twelve, after which the average Swede runs circles around the over-schooled American. Why don't you know these things? To whose advantage is it that you don't?

When students enroll in a Swedish school, the authorities ask three questions: 1. Why do you want to go to this school? 2. What do you want to gain from the experience? 3. What are you interested in?

And they listen to the answers. Can you build a house or a boat? Can you grow food, make clothing, dig a well, sing a song (your own song, that is), make your own children happy, weave a whole life from the everyday world around you? No, you say, you can't? Then listen to me; you have no business with my kid.

In my own life, with my own children, I'm sorry I lacked the courage to say what Hester Prynne, the wearer of the scarlet letter, said to the Puritan elders when they tried to take away her daughter. Alone and friendless, dirt poor, ringed about by enemies, she said, "Over my dead body." A few weeks ago a young woman called me from Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania to tell me the state had just insisted she stop home-schooling her little girl, Chrissie. The state was going to force her to send Chrissie to school. She said she was going to fight, first with the law, although she didn't know where the money would come from, and then by any means she had. If I had to bet on this young, single mother or the State of Pennsylvania to win, I'd bet on the lady because what I was really hearing her say was, "Over my dead body." I wish I'd been able to say that when the state came to take my own children. I didn't. But if I'm born again I promise you that's what I will say.

A few days ago I got a call from a newspaper that wanted some advice for parents about how to launch their children into school. All the reporter wanted was a sound byte from a former New York State Teacher of the Year. What I said was this:

Don't cooperate with your children's school unless the school has come to you in person to work out a meeting of the minds - on your turf, not theirs. Only a desperado would blindly trust his children to a collection of untested strangers and hope for the best. Parents and school personnel are just plain natural adversaries. One group is trying to make a living; the other is trying to make a work of art called a family. If you allow yourself to be co-opted by flattery, seduced with worthless payoffs such as special classes or programs, intimidated by Alice in Wonderland titles and degrees, you will become the enemy within, the extension of state schooling into your own home. Shame on you if you allow that. Your job is to educate, the schoolteacher's is to school; you work for love, the teacher for money. The interests are radically different, one an individual thing, the other a collective. You can make your own son or daughter one of a kind if you have the time and will to do so; school can only make them part of a hive, a herd, or an anthill.

How did I survive for nearly thirty years in a system for which I feel such disgust and loathing? I want to make a confession in the hope it will suggest strategy to other teachers: I did it by becoming an active saboteur, in small ways and large. What I did resolutely was to teach kids what I'm saying here - that schooling is bad business unless it teaches you how to build a boat or a house; that giving strangers intimate information about yourself is certainly to their advantage, but seldom to your own.

On a daily basis I consciously practiced sabotage, breaking laws regularly, forcing the fixed times and spaces of schooling to become elastic, falsifying records so the rigid curricula of those places could be what individual children needed. I threw sand in the gears by encouraging new teachers to think dialectically so that they wouldn't fit into the pyramid of administration. I exploited the weakness of the school's punitive mechanism, which depends on fear to be effective, by challenging it in visible ways, showing I did not fear it, setting administrators against each other to prevent the juggernaut from crushing me. When that didn't work I recruited community forces to challenge the school - businessmen, politicians, parents, and journalists - so I would be given a wide berth. Once, under heavy assault, I asked my wife to run for school board. She got elected, fired the superintendent, and then punished his cronies in a host of imaginative ways.

But what I am most proud of is this: I undermined the confidence of the young in the school institution and replaced it with confidence in their own minds and hearts. I thumbed my nose at William Torrey Harris and gave to my children (although I was well into manhood before I shook off the effects of my own schooling) what had been given to me by the green river Monongahela and the steel city of Pittsburgh: love of family, friends, culture, and neighborhood, and a cup overflowing with self-respect. I taught my kids how to cheat destiny so successfully that they created a record of astonishing success that deserves a book someday. Some of my kids left school to go up the Amazon and live with Indian tribes to study on their own the effects of government dam-building on traditional family life; some went to Nicaragua and joined combat teams to study the amazing hold of poetry on the lives of common people in that land; some made award-winning movies; some became comedians; some succeeded at love, some failed. All learned to argue with Fate in the form of social engineering.



I hope you saw the news story a while back about a national milk price-rigging scheme in schools from Florida to Utah. Fifty-six arrests have already been made in a caper that's existed most of this century. Schools pay more for milk than any other bulk buyer. Does that surprise you? Ask your own school administrator what unit price he pays for school milk and he'll look at you like your marbles are gone. How should he know, why should he care? An assistant principal once said to me, "It's not your money. What are you getting excited about?"

What if I told you that he was the second best school administrator I met in thirty years? He was. That's the standard we've established. The waste in schools is staggering. People are hired and titles created for jobs nobody needs. There's waste in services, waste in precious time spent moving herds of children back and forth through corridors at the sound of a horn. In my experience, poor schools waste much more than rich schools, and rich schools waste more than you could believe.

The only public aspect of these places is that they function as a jobs project, although large numbers of these jobs are set aside as political patronage. Public schools can't understand how the average private school can make profit on a per-seat cost less than half the "free" public charge; they can't understand how the average religious school makes do on even less. Homeschooling is the biggest puzzle of all. A principal once said to me, "Those people must be sick to spend so much time with children and not get paid for it!"

Consider the fantasy of teacher certification. Teachers are licensed and paid as though they are specialists, but they rarely are. For example, a science teacher is almost never actually a scientist - a man or woman who thinks about the secrets of nature as a private passion and pursues this interest on personal time. How many science classes in this country actually make any serious attempt to discover anything or to add to human knowledge? They are orderly ways of killing time, nothing more.

Kids are set to memorizing science vocabulary, repeating well-worn procedures certain to work, chanting formulas exactly as they have been indoctrinated to chant commercials from TV. The science teacher is a publicist for political truths set down in state-approved science textbooks.

Anyone who thinks school science is the inevitable precursor of real science is very innocent, indeed; of a piece, I think, with those poor,

intelligent souls who, aware that television destroys the power to think by providing pre-seen sights, pre-thought thoughts, and unwholesome fantasies, still believe somehow that PBS television must be an exception to the rule.

If you would like to know how scientists are really made, pick up a wonderful book called *Discovering*, published in 1989 by Harvard University Press. In it you'll learn from a prominent scientist himself that not one major scientific discovery of this century, including exotica like superconductivity, came from an academic laboratory; or a corporate or government laboratory, or a school laboratory. You could have guessed the last, but I surprised you with the others, didn't I? All came from garages, attics, and basements; all were managed with cheap, simple equipment and eccentric, personalized procedures of investigation. School is a perfect place to turn science into a religion, but it's the wrong place to learn science, for sure.

The specialists in English, math, social studies, and the rest of the rainbow of progressive subjects are only marginally more competent, if at all. If three million teachers were actually the specialists their licenses claim, they would be a major voice in national life and policy-making; if we are honest, we must wonder how it is possible for an army so large to be so silent, of such little consequence, in spite of the new hokum being retailed about "schoolbased management." Don't misunderstand me: teachers are frequently good people, intelligent people, talented people who work very hard. But regardless of how bright they are, how gracefully they "schoolteach," or how well they control children's behavior (which is, after all, what they are hired to do; if they can't do that, they are fired, but if they can, little else really matters) - the net result of their efforts and our expense is surely very little or even nothing indeed, often it leaves children worse off in terms of mental development and character formation than they were before being "taught." Schools that seem to be successful almost always are made to appear so by selective enrollment of self-motivated children.

The best way into the strange world of compulsory schooling is through books. I always knew real books and schoolbooks were different, but I didn't become conscious of the particulars until I got weary one day of New York City's brainless English curriculum and decided to teach *Moby Dick* to mainstream eighth-grade English classes. I discovered that the *White Whale* is too big for the forty-five-minute bell breaks of a junior

high school. I couldn't make it "fit." But the editors of the school edition of Moby Dick had provided a package of prefabricated questions and nearly a hundred interpretations of their own. Every chapter began and ended with a barrage of these interventions. I came to see that the school edition wasn't a real book at all but a disguised indoctrination. The book had been rendered teacher-proof and student-proof.

This jigsaw fragmentation, designed to make the job site safe from its employees, is usually credited to Frederick Taylor's work of sinister genius, *Scientific Management*, written at the turn of this century. But that is wrong. The system was really devised before the American Revolution, in eighteenth-century Prussia, by Frederick the Great, and honed to perfection in early nineteenth-century Prussia after its humiliating defeat by Napoleon in 1806. A new system of schooling was the instrument out of which Prussian vengeance was shaped, a system that reduced human beings during their malleable years to reliable machine parts, human machinery dependent upon the state for its mission and purpose. When Blucher's Death's Head Hussars destroyed Napoleon at Waterloo, the value of Prussian schooling was confined.

By 1819, Prussian philosophy had given the world its first laboratory of compulsory schooling. That same year Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, the story of a German intellectual who fabricated a monster out of the parts of dead bodies: compulsory schooling was the monster she had in mind, emblemized in the lurching destruction caused by a homeless, synthetic creature seeking its maker, a creature with the infinite inner pain that ambiguous family brings.

In the nineteenth century, ties between Prussia and the United States were exceedingly close, a fact unknown these days because it became embarrassing to us during the World Wars and so was removed from history books. American scholarship during the nineteenth century was almost exclusively German at its highest levels, another fact conveniently absent from popular history. From 1814 to 1900, more than fifty thousand young men from prominent American families made the pilgrimage to Prussia and other parts of Germany to study under its new system of higher education based on research instead of "teaching." Ten thousand brought back Ph.D.'s to a then-uncredentialed United States, preempting most of the available intellectual and technical work.

Prussian education was the national obsession among American political leaders, industrialists, clergy, and university people. In 1845, the Prussian emperor was even asked to adjudicate the boundary between Canada and the United States! Virtually every founding father of American compulsory schooling went to Prussia to study its clockwork schoolrooms firsthand. Horace Mann's *Seventh Report To The Boston School Committee* of 1844 was substantially devoted to glowing praise of Prussian accomplishments and how they should become our own. Victor Cousin's book on Prussian schooling was the talk of our country about the same time. When, only a quarter-century later, Prussia crushed France in a brief war and performed the miracle of unifying Germany, it seemed clear that the way to unify our immigrant classes - which we so desperately sought to do - was through Prussian schooling.

By 1905, Prussian trained Americans, or Americans like John Dewey who apprenticed at Prussian-trained hands, were in command of every one of our new institutions of scientific teacher training: Columbia Teacher's College, the University of Chicago, Johns Hopkins, the University of Wisconsin, Stanford. The domination of Prussian vision, and the general domination of German philosophy and pedagogy, was a fait accompli among the leadership of American schooling.

You should care about this for the compelling reason that German practices were used here to justify removal of intellectual material from the curriculum; it may explain why your own children cannot think. That was the Prussian way - to train only a leadership cadre to think.

Of all the men whose vision excited the architects of the new Prussianized American school machine, the most exciting were a German philosopher named Hegel and a German doctor named Wilhelm Wundt. In Wundt's laboratory the techniques of psychophysics (what today we might call "experimental psychology") were refined. Thanks to his work, it took only a little imagination to see an awesome new world emerging - for Wundt had demonstrated convincingly to his American students that people were only complex machines!

Man a machine? The implications were exhilarating, promising liberation from the ancient shackles of tradition, culture, morality, and religion. Adjustment became the watchword of schools and social welfare offices. G. Stanley Hall, one of Wundt's personal protégés (who as a professor at Johns Hopkins had inoculated his star pupil, John Dewey, with the

German virus), now joined with Thorndike, his German-trained colleague at Columbia Teacher's College, to beat the drum for national standardized testing. Hall shrewdly sponsored and promoted an American tour for the Austrian doctor Sigmund Freud so that Freud might popularize his theory that parents and family were the cause of virtually all maladjustment - all the more reason to remove their little machines to the safety of schools.

In the minds of disciples of German educational thought, scientific education was primarily a way of forcing people to fit. With such a "technical" goal in mind, the future course of American schooling was determined, and with massive financial support from the foundations - especially those of the Rockefeller and Carnegie families - new scientific colleges to share teachers were established. In Prussia these were aptly called "teacher seminaries," but here secular religionists were more discreet: a priesthood of trained professionals would guard the new school-church and write its canonical text into state law. Thus the Torah of twentieth century compulsory schooling was in its Ark by 1895, one third of the way through the reign of William Torrey Harris as U.S. Commissioner of Education.

Teacher training in Prussia was founded on three premises, which the United States subsequently borrowed. The first of these is that the state is sovereign, the only true parent of children. Its corollary is that biological parents are the enemies of their offspring. When Germany's Froebel invented Kindergarten, it was not a garden for children he had in mind but a garden of children, in which state-appointed teachers were the gardeners of the children. Kindergarten is meant to protect children from their own mothers.

The second premise of Prussian schooling is that intellectual training is not the purpose of state schooling - obedience and subordination are. In fact, intellectual training will invariably subvert obedience unless it is rigidly controlled and doled out as a reward for obedience. If the will could be broken all else would follow. Keep in mind that will-breaking was the central logic of child-rearing among our own Puritan colonists, and you will see the natural affinity that exists between Prussian seeds and Puritan soil - from which agriculture our compulsory schooling law springs. The best-known device to break the will of the young, practiced for centuries among English and German upper classes, was the separation of parent and child at an early age. Here now was an

institution backed by the police power of the state to guarantee that separation. But it was not enough to compel obedience by intimidation. The child must be brought to love its synthetic parent. When George Orwell's protagonist in 1984 realizes that he loves Big Brother after betraying his lover to the state, we have a dramatic embodiment of the sexual destination of Prussian-type schooling; it creates a willingness to sell out your own family, friends, culture, and religion for your new lover, the state. Twelve years of arbitrary punishment and reward in the confinement of a classroom is ample time to condition any child to believe that he who wields red pen-power is the true parent, and they who control the buzzers must be gods.

The third premise of Prussian training is that the schoolroom and the workplace shall be dumbed down into simplified fragments that anyone, however dumb, can memorize and operate. This solves the historical dilemma of leadership: a disobedient work force could be replaced quickly, without damage to production, if the workers required only habit, not mind, to function properly. This strategy paid off recently during the national strike of air traffic controllers, when the entire force of these supposed "experts" was replaced overnight by management personnel and hastily trained fill-ins. There was no increase in accidents across the system! If anyone can do any particular job there's no reason to pay them very much except to guarantee employee loyalty and dependency - a form of love which bad parents often extort from their young in the same way.

In the training ground of the classroom, everything is reduced to bits under close management control. This allows progress to be quantified into precise rankings to track students throughout their careers - the great irony being that it's not intellectual growth that grades and reports really measure, but obedience to authority. That's why regular disclosures about the lack of correlation between standardized test scores and performance do not end the use of these surveillance mechanisms. What they actually measure is the tractability of the student, and this they do quite accurately. Is it of value to know who is docile and who may not be? You tell me.

Finally, if workers or students have little or no idea how their own part fits into the whole, if they are unable to make decisions, grow food, build a home or boat, or even entertain themselves, then political and economic stability will reign because only a carefully screened and seasoned

leadership will know how things work. Uninitiated citizens will not even know what questions should be asked, let alone where the answers might be found.

This is sophisticated pedagogy indeed, if far from what mother and father expect when they send Junior to school. This is what the religious Right is talking about when it claims that schooling is a secular religion. If you can think independently of pre-thought thoughts and received wisdom, you must certainly arrive at the same conclusion, whatever your private theology. Schooling is our official state religion; in no way is it a neutral vehicle for learning.

The sheer craziness of what we do to our children should have been sufficient cause to stop it once the lunacy was manifest in increased social pathology, but a crucial development forestalled corrective action: schooling became the biggest business of all. Suddenly there were jobs, titles, careers, prestige, and contracts to protect. As a country we've never had the luxury of a political or a religious or a cultural consensus. As a synthetic state, we've had only economic consensus: unity is achieved by making everyone want to get rich, or making them envy those who are.

Once a splendid economic machine like schooling was rolling, only a madman would try to stop it or to climb off its golden ascent. True, its jobs didn't seem to pay much (although its contractors did and do make fortunes), but upon closer inspection they paid more than most. And the security for the obedient was matchless because the institution provided the best insurance that a disturbing social mobility (characteristic of a frontier society) could finally be checked. Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, William Harris, Edward Thorndike, William James, John Dewey, Stanley Hall, Charles Judd, Ellwood Cubberly, James Russell - all the great schoolmen of American history - made endless promises to industrialists and old-line American families of prominence that if the new Prussian scheme were given support, prospects of a revolution here would vanish. (What a great irony that in a revolutionary nation the most effective motivator of leadership was the guarantee that another one could be prevented!)

Schools would be the insurance policy for a new industrial order which, as an unfortunate by-product of its operations, would destroy the American family, the small farmer, the landscape, the air, the water, the religious base of community life, the time-honored covenant that

Americans could rise and fall by their own efforts. This industrial order would destroy democracy itself, and the promise held out to common men and women that if they were ever backed into a corner by their leaders, they might change things overnight at the ballot box.

I hope you can see now that this Prussian theory of workplaces and schools isn't just some historical oddity, but is necessary to explain customary textbook structure and classroom procedures, which fly in the face of how people actually learn. It explains the inordinate interest the foundations of Rockefeller and Carnegie took in shaping early compulsory schooling around a standardized factory model, and it sheds light on many mysterious aspects of modern American culture: for instance, why, in a democracy, can't citizens be automatically registered at birth to vote, once and for all?

Compulsory schooling has been, from the beginning, a scheme of indoctrination into the new concept of mass man, an important part of which was the creation of a proletariat. According to Auguste Comte (surely the godfather of scientific schooling), you could create a useful proletariat class by breaking connections between children and their families, their communities, their God, and themselves. Remember William Harris's belief that self-alienation was the key to successful schooling! Of course it is. These connections have to be broken to create a dependable citizenry because, if left alive, the loyalties they foster are unpredictable and unmanageable. People who maintain such relationships often say, "Over my dead body." How can states operate that way?

Think of government schooling as a vast behavior clinic designed to create a harmless proletariat, the most important part of which is a professional proletariat of lawyers, doctors, engineers, managers, government people, and schoolteachers. This professional proletariat, more homeless than the poor and the sub-poor, is held hostage by its addiction to luxury and security, and by its fear that the licensing monopoly might be changed by any change in governance. The main service it renders - advice - is contaminated by self interest. We are all dying from it, the professional proletariat faster than anyone. It is their children who commit literal suicide with such regularity, not the children of the poor. ...

Printing questions at the end of chapters is a deliberate way of dumbing down a text to make it teacher-proof. We've done it so long that nobody

examines the premises under the practice or sees the permanent reduction in mental sovereignty it causes. Just as science teachers were never supposed to be actual scientists, literature teachers weren't supposed to be original thinkers who brought original questions to the text.

In 1926, Bertrand Russell said casually that the United States was the first nation in human history to deliberately deny its children the tools of critical thinking; actually Prussia was first, we were second. The school edition of Moby Dick asked all the right questions, so I had to throw it away. Real books don't do that. They let readers actively participate with their own questions. Books that show you the best questions to ask aren't just stupid, they hurt the intellect under the guise of helping it, just as standardized tests do.

Well-schooled people, like schoolbooks, are very much alike. Propagandists have known for a century that school-educated people are easier to lead than ignorant people - as Dietrich Bonhoeffer confirmed in his studies of Nazism.

It's very useful for some people that our form of schooling tells children what to think about, how to think about it, and when to think about it. It's very useful to some groups that children are trained to be dependent on experts, to react to titles instead of judging the real men and women who hide behind the titles. It isn't very healthy for families and neighborhoods, cultures and religions. But then school was never about those things anyway: that's why we don't have them around anymore. You can thank government schooling for that.

I think it would be fair to say that the overwhelming majority of people who make schools work today are unaware why they fail to give us successful human beings, no matter how much money is spent or how much good will is expended on reform efforts. This explains the inevitable temptation to find villains and to cast blame - on bad teaching, bad parents, bad children, or penurious taxpayers.

The thought that school may be a brilliantly conceived social engine that works exactly as it was designed to work and produces exactly the human products it was designed to produce establishes a different relation to the usual demonologies. Seeing school as a triumph of human ingenuity, as a glorious success, forces us to consider whether we want this kind of

success, and if not, to envision something of value in its place. And it forces us to challenge whether there is a "we," a national consensus sufficient to justify looking for one right way rather than dozens or even hundreds of right ways. I don't think there is.

Museums and institutes of useful knowledge travel a different road than schools. Consider the difference between librarians and schoolteachers. Librarians are custodians of real books and real readers; schoolteachers are custodians of schoolbooks and indentured readers. Somewhere in the difference is the Rosetta Stone that reveals how education is one thing, schooling another.

Begin with the setting and social arrangement of a library. The ones I've visited all over the country invariably are comfortable and quiet, places where you can read rather than just pretend to read. How important this silence is. Schools are never silent. People of all ages work side by side in libraries, not just a pack of age-segregated kids. For some reason, libraries do not segregate by age nor do they presume to segregate readers by questionable tests of reading ability. Just as the people who decoded the secrets of farming or of the forests and oceans were not segregated by age or test scores, the library seems to have intuited that common human judgment is adequate to most learning decisions.

The librarian doesn't tell me what to read, doesn't tell me the sequence of reading I have to follow, doesn't grade my reading. Librarians act as if they trust their customers. The librarian lets me ask my own questions and helps me when I need help, not when the library decides I need it. If I feel like reading in the same place all day long, that seems to be OK with the library. It doesn't tell me to stop reading at regular intervals by ringing a bell in my ear. The library keeps its nose out of my home, too. It doesn't send letters to my mother reporting on my library behavior; it doesn't make recommendations or issue orders on how I should use my time spent outside of the library.

The library doesn't have a tracking system. Everyone is mixed together there, and no private files exist detailing my past victories and defeats as a patron. If the books I want are available, I get them by requesting them - even if that deprives some more gifted reader, who comes a minute later. The library doesn't presume to determine which of us is more qualified to read that book; it doesn't play favorites. It is a very class-blind, talent-blind place, appropriately reflecting our historic political

ideals in a way that puts schools to shame.

The public library isn't into public humiliation the way schools seem to be. It never posts ranked lists of good and bad readers for all to see. Presumably it considers good reading its own reward, not requiring additional accolades, and it has resisted the temptation to hold up good reading as a moral goad to bad readers. One of the strangest differences between libraries and schools, in New York City at least, is that you almost never see a kid behaving badly in a library or waving a gun there - even though bad kids have exactly the same access to libraries as good kids do. Bad kids seem to respect libraries, a curious phenomenon which may well be an unconscious response to the automatic respect libraries bestow blindly on everyone. Even people who don't like to read like libraries from time to time; in fact, they are such generally wonderful places I wonder why we haven't made them compulsory - and all alike, of course, too.

Here's another angle to consider: the library never makes predictions about my general future based on my past reading habits, nor does it hint that my days will be happier if I read Shakespeare rather than Barbara Cartland. The library tolerates eccentric reading habits because it realizes that free men and women are often very eccentric.

And finally, the library has real books, not schoolbooks. Its volumes are not written by collective pens or picked by politically correct screening committees. Real books conform only to the private curriculum of each writer, not to the invisible curriculum of some German collective agenda. The one exception to this is children's books - but no sensible child ever reads those things, so the damage from them is minimal.

Real books are deeply subversive of collectivization. They are the best known way to escape herd behavior, because they are vehicles transporting their reader into deep caverns of absolute solitude where nobody else can visit: No two people ever read the same great book. Real books disgust the totalitarian mind because they generate uncontrollable mental growth - and it cannot be monitored!

Television has entered the classroom because it is a collective mechanism and, as such, much superior to textbooks; similarly, slides, audio tapes, group games, and so on meet the need to collectivize, which is a central purpose of mass schooling. This is the famous "socialization" that schools

do so well. Schoolbooks, on the other hand, are paper tools that reinforce school routines of close-order drill, public mythology, endless surveillance, global ranking, and constant intimidation.

That's what the questions at the end of chapters are designed to do, to bring you back to a reality in which you are subordinate. Nobody really expects you to answer those questions, not even the teacher; they work their harm solely by being there. That is their genius. Schoolbooks are a crowd-control device. Only the very innocent and well-schooled see any difference between good ones and bad ones; both kinds do the same work. In that respect they are much like television programming, the function of which, as a plug in narcotic, is infinitely more powerful than any trivial differences between good programs and bad.

Real books educate, schoolbooks school, and thus libraries and library policies are a major clue to the reform of American schooling. When you take the free will and solitude out of education it becomes schooling. You can't have it both ways.



## Additional Gatto Reading

*The Underground History of American Education*

The complete text of this book is available online at  
[www.johntaylorgatto.com/chapters/index.htm](http://www.johntaylorgatto.com/chapters/index.htm)

*Institutional Schooling Must Be Destroyed*

[school-survival.net/articles/school/history/Institutional\\_schooling\\_must\\_be\\_destroyed.php](http://school-survival.net/articles/school/history/Institutional_schooling_must_be_destroyed.php)

*The Public School Nightmare*

<http://www.diablovalleyschool.org/nightmare.shtml>

*Why Schools Don't Educate*

[http://www.naturalchild.org/guest/john\\_gatto.html](http://www.naturalchild.org/guest/john_gatto.html)

*A Short Angry History of American Forced Schooling*

[http://www.4brevard.com/choice/Public\\_Education.htm](http://www.4brevard.com/choice/Public_Education.htm)

## Other Resources

*The Teenage Liberation Handbook* by Grace Llewellyn

This book completely destroyed the way I used to think about schools and "education." I only wish I'd read it as a teenager still trapped in the terror of public school. Addresses just about every concern and question kids and parents considering unschooling could have. Excellent book.

*Guerrilla Learning: How to Give Your Kids a Real Education with or without School*

Another great book by Grace Llewellyn.

[unschooling.com](http://unschooling.com)

This website isn't super showy, but it has many links for information and networking among active and potential unschoolers.

<http://www.sandradodd.com/unschooling>

Another website full of information from an activist and mother of unschooled children. Also contains tons of links to other writings online.

Education... now seems to me perhaps the most authoritarian and dangerous of all the social inventions of mankind. It is the deepest foundation of the modern slave state, in which most people feel themselves to be nothing but producers, consumers, spectators, and 'fans,' driven more and more, in all parts of their lives, by greed, envy, and fear. My concern is not to improve 'education' but to do away with it, to end the ugly and anti-human business of people-shaping and to allow and help people to shape themselves.

- John Holt, pioneer of youth rights activism

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