

A Prototype Anti-School¹

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Protest, rebellion, retreat, and experiment were all motifs in the Progressive Educational movement of the nineteen twenties. In many European countries there had been previous attempts to innovate in education — one thinks of Pestalozzi, Montessori,² and Herbart — but the aftermath of the First World War stimulated social and educational change. In Britain this took the form of the independent, progressive, boarding school which was a reaction both against the distorting nature of urban, industrial society — a society, which had just inflicted immense casualties on itself. At times it is difficult to separate the progressives' specifically educational aims and practices from their diffuse social aspirations which were, in effect, millennial and utopian. For instance, Kees Boeke, the Dutch pioneer, believed that his educational work with children would pave the way for a new society and this was true of many inter-war radicals.³

But in this paper I intend to focus on one aspect of that inter-war movement namely how the progressive educational ideology became translated into practice at the internationally renowned school at Dartington Hall.⁴

Dartington was founded in 1926⁵ (the year that Boeke began his activities)⁶ as a radical alternative to the character-moulding Public School with its explicit apparatus of control — through religion, sport, flogging, uniform, group cohesion, and so on.⁷ Along with A. S. Neill's Summerhill and the Russells' Beacon Hill,⁸ Dartington rejected the stereotyping processes of traditional education, which they saw as distorting the early development of the child, and sought an alternative structural form that would be flexible, open, evolving, and egalitarian and that promoted liberty and individualism rather than conformity and collectivism. At Dartington the founders, headmaster, and staff believed that they were implementing a revolutionary educational ideal of a 'free school' — with freedom of movement, dress, and expression, with democratic decision-making, with a minimum of constantly changing rules mutually agreed between children and adults, and *with no attempt to mould or shape the child's personality or to induce him or her to internalize values unwillingly.*

These pioneering schools have enjoyed an influence, and a notoriety out of all proportion to their size (in 1965 their total population of all ages was only 7,000 pupils or 0.2 % of all children in British secondary schools.).⁹ Yet they have not attracted the depth of research that one might expect. In particular, there is little of a sociological nature either on the movement as a whole or on specific schools. My approach, however, has been explicitly sociological and takes as its focus the tension between the ideal of freedom and the demands of social life for a modicum of cohesion, continuity, and predictability. In brief, the sociological promise of Dartington is that it raises some of the basic dilemmas of social life; with traditional restraints removed did a Hobbesian 'war of all against all' prevail, and, if not, why not? My theoretical perspective was based on viewing the boarding school as a small social system. In particular attention was focussed on patterns of symbolic interaction and modes of socialization, control mechanisms, boundary maintenance, conceptualizations of role, and normative components of the community culture. The research was preceded by a thorough analysis of the literature on prisons, concentration camps, mental hospitals, religious cloisters, medical schools, American colleges, Israeli boardingschools, military academies, and other clearly defined systems with pronounced socialization (or desocialization) functions. The project itself drew upon the extensive accounts, memoirs, and biographies of progressive teachers, on primary sources in the files at Dartington (minutes of meetings, headmasters' reports, letters from parents, reports on individual pupils, etc.), and on a large number of depth interviews with former pupils. From lists of former pupils — which were incomplete owing to administrative inefficiency, death, and migration (thus precluding a statistically random sample) — two cohorts of men and women were drawn who had left the school in the nineteen thirties and nineteen fifties and who were living in Britain. These 60 former pupils of Dartington, now in their thirties and forties, were interviewed by me in their homes with the use of a tape recorder. Other interviews were also carried out with former teachers, trustees of the school, and the founder of the estate, Leonard Elmhirst. The research was written up as a widely-ranging, explorative case study rather than as a hypothesis-testing, applied model of methodological investigation.

The Paradox of Expressive Totality

Given their libertarian ideology, the curious thing about the English progressives was that they chose exactly the same means as their sworn enemies, the Public Schools, namely rural boarding schools. One thus gets the paradox of freedom being implemented within a framework that has structural characteristics reminiscent of Goffman's concept of 'total institution'.¹⁰ Goffman,

however, concentrated on those institutions — mental hospitals, prisons, ships, armies, etc., — which assault the self through a process of abasement and 'disculturation'. He virtually ignores those groups who use totality to enhance commitment and who have a high degree of socialization to expressive values such as communes, monasteries, elite military academies, and some boarding schools. An oppressive and brutal approved school might approximate to the Goffmanesque model but most public schools simply do not elicit the alienation and decomposition of self which Goffman observed at a Washington mental hospital for 7,000 patients. As for Summerhill or Dartington they reserve the concept of 'custodial' *by trying to keep the outside world out rather than the inmates in.*

If we examine the structural features of the radical progressive schools (Dartington, Summerhill, Kilquhanity, Wennington, and Monkton Wyld — Beacon Hill has closed) they are small, rural, remote coeducational schools with most of their pupils as boarders. They were founded either in the twenties or the early nineteen forties. In addition, they have tended to enjoy headmasters of strong personality and great longevity — Bill Curry was at Dartington for 25 years, Eleonor Urban was at Monkton for over twenty years, and two other schools still have their original headmasters, Aitkenhead at Kilquhanity, and Barnes at Wennington. A. S. Neill, of course, ran Summerhill for over fifty years.¹²

Finally, the progressives worked through the independent sector; they fundamentally distrusted the modern, centralized state and its potential totalitarianism, e.g. Bertrand Russell wrote:

'State education . . . produces, in so far as it is successful, a herd of ignorant fanatics, ready at the word of command to engage in a war of persecution as may be required of them. So great is this evil that the world would be a better place (at any rate, in my opinion), if State education had never been inaugurated'.¹³

As middle-class independents they chose the norm for their stratum in society which was boarding. And thus one gets the paradox of fervent libertarians fleeing the city to found sect-like communes in Devon, or Suffolk, or Scotland in order to guarantee a 'free' environment for the unhampered development of the unique, and precious personality of the individual child. The result was an institution 'total' in form, yet which considered itself to be not only open and endlessly creative but also as being non-directive in allowing the natural, organic development of its pupils. How true was this practice? *Order and Social Control.*

(a) Charismatic Leadership and Self-Government

Above all, Curry's educational philosophy as headmaster at Dartington re-

vered one major article of faith; that the child was capable of almost adult self-determination and was amenable to rational persuasion. Unfortunately, the social world of the progressive school is rent with periodic crises when individuals or groups threaten the delicate social order. How then was authority to be exercised when reason fell on deaf ears?

This problem was exacerbated by the recruitment of some disturbed children who went in for destructive vandalism, gang leadership, sexual conquests, and even personal violence.¹⁴ For example, a group of boys broke seventy windows by throwing potatoes at them; a boy of eight stabbed a girl with a pen-knife inflicting a number of surface wounds; and one particular boy began a campaign of theft,

'... And certainly for two years I would steal anything that came my way. Money, food — this was the great thing because of rationing and one was always hungry. I remember very clearly a coup we carried out on the kitchen . . while this girl was singing 'Boom' in the French cabaret the rest of us had already got the windows to the kitchen open and we had made a master key into the main pantry there and we shifted a — I think about several hundred cigarettes, a lot of chocolate bars, a great quantity of Horlicks, cheese was on another occasion, a lot of bottled gooseberries, no, loganberries, . . . I also stole outside the school. We used to go into Woolworths with gas capes, things like bicycle capes, and this conveniently covered the counter while your hands were filling your pockets underneath. Also one used to break into things the apple store just across from the school'.¹⁵

Without wishing to exaggerate the extent of disturbances at Dartington, it is plain that they were a serious threat to Curry's leadership and it is very revealing to see how he coped with what he called 'anti-social' behaviour. In set pieces, as on the self-governing Council of staff and children, he appears to have been virtually irresistible with his cool logic and considerable powers of debate, e.g. a former pupil remarked:

'Curry was very influential. He was the Chairman and held the casting vote. He was a very, very powerful arguer, very clever with his tongue, and he would always sway a meeting any way he wanted it to go'.¹⁶

Face to face, he was even more formidable and one respondent claimed that he felt at the time that it would have been less painful to have been beaten than to be hauled before Curry for some misdemeanor. In short, a powerful ingredient of the social cement at Darginton was the forceful personality of its charismatic headmaster, Bill Curry, whose manipulation of the pupils was greatly at variance with his espoused ideals.

(b) The Pupil Society

With each pupil encouraged to do 'his own thing' one might expect something

of an atomistic society populated by self-regulating individuals. In practice the social world of the progressive school is permeated with group activities, powerfully enforced collective norms, and strong group sanctions against deviants.¹⁷ For instance, one woman elaborated the code defining what was acceptable among girls,

'There were very strong taboos about wearing make-up, except at parties possibly, and the standards about make-up were more specific than that — lipstick was slightly ridiculous but OK, powder was not because that was deception, you couldn't necessarily tell if someone was wearing powder. Stockings were not to be worn except at parties, . . .'¹⁸

My evidence indicates that it required great courage to go against the dictates of the pupil society (e.g. wearing a costume during the mixed nude bathing in the school pool would have been almost unthinkable) and while the inflexibility of the progressive code was a direct antithesis of the movements' aims it became an important element of social control, controlling deviance and spelling predictability. In effect, the unintended consequence of the 'Progressive Ethic' was that its individualistic, anti-authoritarian ideology produced an almost tribal closeness.¹⁹ The paradox was that on the one hand the staff tried to espouse the classical progressive doctrine of non-interference while, on the other hand, the children, faced with this potentially normless situation, embraced progressive values with an almost religious zeal.

The 'freedoms' at Dartington seemed to breed a certain degree of insecurity and in response to this the children developed a ritualized nonconformity, where even the obscenity was stereotyped, and where ritual gave visible expression of public morals lest there be any doubt about private conscience. Rites and taboos, separating the sacred from the profane, pervaded an institution ideally based on consensual contract. The cruel irony was that the children preferred security, and even domination, rather than the perpetual burden of making their own decisions. They not only elected Curry 'dictator' on one occasion, but they slavishly conformed to 'nonconforming' forms of symbolic deviance in dress, language, cultural styles, and behaviour.²⁰ Given the physical totality of Dartington I believe that the above considerations, among others, made the children highly vulnerable to the 'normative' and expressive aspects of totality where the institutional values are deeply internalized. Their compulsive nonconformity made their deviance from conventional norms largely predictable and thereby comprised a latent source of social control.

(c) Boundary Maintenance

While the children at Dartington had technically much greater freedom than say a public school pupil to move around and off the estate (comprising sever-

al thousand acres) the locale tended to serve as an aesthetic backcloth to an almost self-contained community. At the same time, the worlds of the estate and the non-estate were hedged with a strong mutual antagonism. When the children did foray into the locality, however, their nonconforming behaviour and dress — one respondent recalled walking through Totnes in his bare feet eating cornflakes out of a packet and singing — only served to heighten their consciousness of being different and special because of the interest they aroused. The attitude engendered by this self-conscious introspection tended towards the drawing of spatial and psychic boundaries with the wider society e.g. 'We went to the cinema in Totnes, otherwise there was a big gulf and, of course, we looked down on the people in the locality. We felt that the whole educational establishment of the country was wrong, and that the school was a pioneer, was a cause for freedom in education and so on, which was opposed by two main coteries of educational conservatism — the Public Schools with their beatings and snobbery on the one hand, and homosexuality, and the local authority schools, grammar schools, with their authoritarianism, lower class snobbish conformism, restrictions, Church of England, etc. on the other. And we felt equally antagonistic to the two and equally defensive — I always remember feeling so uncomfortable on walking to the cinema in Totnes, and passing a lot of kids from Totnes Grammar School, one would tend to slip to the other side of the road. I don't remember any overt conflict, but they represented something, and we were very well aware of being a minority group representing a liberal and to some extent unpopular, minority cause'.²¹

That man was speaking of the nineteen thirties and it is interesting to hear another respondent, who was at the school almost twenty years later, echo his elitist sentiments,

'Basically, we felt the school was the centre of the world . . . when you walked into Totnes you would see all the grammar school boys and girls dressed up in uniform and we felt so superior to these people dressed up in an old-fashioned way. We really had this thing that we were the future of civilisation, and these people were stuck with old fashions and conventions and one should pity them. It was rather like one's attitude to religion, that it was something people believed in in the olden days, and one should be nice to the few old people who still do believe in it'.²²

Surrounded by a hostile press, conservative Devon, and a sceptical educational establishment, the 'Chosen Few' of progressive education reacted with defensive self-affirmation. Most crucially, the children developed a strong identification with the school which made them determined not to act to its detriment, e.g. one woman explained,

'People would think it would be very wrong to get the school a bad name, if one was going to have affairs then you should make certain that you didn't

become pregnant or you conducted yourself in a way that didn't give the school a bad name — I think that was really the only overriding thing I would say . . . Personally I definitely don't look back on it as a happy period but in spite of that I remember very clearly having this feeling that we were a minority who were open to criticism the whole time — all one's family apart from one's parents were horrified that one was there at all and you felt well you'd just got to close the ranks and I would never have admitted to anybody outside that I wasn't happy — would never have dreamt of it. I think it was simply — apart from Neill's school — we were just about as way out as you could be in those days and we were what we reckoned was a very select band of less than 100 people or whatever the school was then — when I first went there we were 28 children — so one really felt one was an absolutely amazing minority that everyone — well the eyes of the world were on us so we imagined'.²³ The pressure of external public opinion, which would have relished any scandalous morsel from the 'do as you please' school, bound the pupils together with an 'esprit de corps' that cemented internal cohesion and commitment.²⁴

The Contemporary Free School Movement

In my evidence on Dartington I have tried to suggest one or two areas that a sociologist might consider in analysing the progressive school as an 'anti-institution'. Elsewhere I have widened the perspective to include a number of similar collectivities with an anti-authoritarian, anti-institutional ideology. I would contend that the evidence for Dartington — a rich, upperclass boarding school for trendy deviants — is suggestive of the problems of control found in alternative societies, such as communes and religious sects, and more appropriately to our purposes, to the contemporary 'free school'.²⁵

Contemporary radicals in education — be they de-schoolers or free-schoolers — affect not to appreciate the legacy of the classical progressives which they see as largely irrelevant to the needs of deprived, urban, working-class children in day schools. Many of their emancipative idealism, however, echoes values that have a lineage from Rousseau (if not before). And the problems of running an anti-school, be it in lush Devon or the Scotland Road of Liverpool, are comparable because of the dichotomy between their ideology and the 'functional imperatives', so to speak, of institutional survival. Here, for instance, is an extract from an article on the Scotland Road Free School²⁶: 'A boy, banging a stick on a table during a tape-recording, is asked to stop; he replies, 'why should I, it's a free school isn't it?'. The offices in Limekiln Lane are heavily barricaded — to keep out the children. The heavy iron door is padlocked, the walls of the yard are topped with barbed wire, and the windows are protected by heavy wire mesh. There is a belief in total freedom and

consequently a refusal to ensure that equipment is securely locked away so books, food and tools are destroyed and pigeons are released from their loft. No — one appears to perceive any inconsistency between this refusal to lock up the tools and the necessity of locking up the building. Nor does there appear to be an awareness that freedom to steal equipment conflicts with the freedom of others to make use of it'.

Perhaps the biggest contradiction in schools espousing freedom is between a belief in not indoctrinating the child and the passionate commitment and self-sacrificing devotion of the founders of radical alternatives in education. Indeed, Kozol is scathing both about the sameness of middle-class, Summerhillian free schools in the States.

'Why is it, in so many of these self-conscious, open and ecstatic Free Schools for rich children, everyone boasts that he is doing 'his own thing' but everyone in each of these schools, from coast to coast, is doing the same KIND of thing? Why is it, we ask, that 'free choice' so often proves to mean the weaver's loom, tie-dye and macramé, that 'organic growth' turns out in every case to mean the potter's kiln?' and about their studied non-involvement in wider social political issues: 'It is in fact by no means non-ideological or non-political. It is a clear and obvious choice AGAINST the voice of anger. It is a clear and obvious choice AGAINST the need for ethical behaviour. It is a clear and obvious choice AGAINST the need for struggle, confrontation, intervention'.²⁷

It is my opinion, then, that in a number of ways radical schools tend to face the same sort of internal tensions, dilemmas and contradictions arising principally from the difficulties of institutionalizing abstract concepts such as 'freedom', 'growth', 'natural development', 'non-interference' etc. In particular, they often have problems of social control both because they attract children damaged in certain ways and because they find it difficult to justify interference and the imposition of authority when disturbances occur.

Indeed, I would argue that free schools tend to see freedom in terms of freedom *from* the stereotypical state school and are less impressive both in their ability to define what freedom will be used *for* and to achieve the fruits of positive freedom. In practice, when the fetters are removed, children do not always behave as reasonable, tolerant, self-motivating individuals with an unquenchable thirst for self-fulfillment. There are frequently problems of control, of motivation, of notoriety, and of the danger that freedom devolves into licence and that a 'Lord of the Flies' situation emerges. For example, the New School Vancouver was totally unstructured. A small gang of aggressive young boys, called the 'Monkey Patrol', began to dominate the school, bullying other children and destroying school property. A teacher recalled: 'There were Cuisenaire rod fights, fort fights, paint fights, water fights. Student artwork

was destroyed, pencils and rulers, karate chopped, chairs broken up, desks smashed, sawn in half. The ditto machine became a juvenile pornography and hate-literature plant . . . ' talks about fucking so much you get the idea she wants to be fucked. C'mon . . . ' Or 'every good boy should fuck his sister'.²⁸ Such examples may be extreme but they do raise the theoretical problems of order and control in contemporary free schools.

Conclusion

What I've tried to do in this short paper is to convey some of the flavour of my research into Progressive Education and especially to suggest areas of the Progressive School which are rewarding for sociological enquiry. In my thesis I argued that the classical progressives' emotional counter-traditionalism virtually precluded an observer from taking the myth of non-interference seriously. Furthermore, I would even argue that there is a possible abdication of responsibility in that many of the adults attracted to progressive education are possibly searching for their own freedom part of which involves granting autonomy to the child.²⁹ At the same time it is easy for them to ignore ways in which children imitate or identify with adults or may become dependent upon them. Similarly, it is easy for them to believe that children who accept their values have done so through their unclouded free-will. And there can be little doubt that they desperately wanted to transmit their ideas, e.g. Selleck³⁰ writes of the inter-war progressives that they had a quality, of 'almost messianic enthusiasm: they were out to win young converts, to show the way to salvation. A. S. Neill's dominie is a self-righteous young man, a dedicated and condescending prophet who busies himself showing others the error of their ways and the rightness of his . . . Progressive education was not produced by cool, poised, detached philosophers intent on sifting ideas until they found the few grains of truth . . . their ideas came white-hot, forged on the reformer's anvil, they aimed at conversion, at changing attitudes and behaviour and did not allow for doubts and qualifications; they were not attempts to arrive at the truth, they were proclamations of the truth; they did not define, they demonstrated . . . Through all they said and did, there runs the belief that great things were at stake — the salvation of the world . . . They were, in their professional capacity at least, intense, single-minded and humourless. They lacked balance, detachment, and irony: the cause was too great and their absorption in it too complete to permit the distancing such qualities require . . . They were uncompromisingly dedicated . . . the progressives have the hallmarks of the missionary. And, some might say, of the ideologist'. Like Selleck, my thesis was somewhat sceptical and critical of the progressives' claims and of the institutional reality of the school's social life. My major

conclusions centred on three areas. Firstly, it was argued that this type of 'anti-institution' with its nebulous guidelines for action is difficult to operationalize at a day-to-day level because so many of its concepts are imprecise and because they often conflict with institutional imperatives for cohesion and continuity. Secondly, that the ideal of 'non-interference' by staff was often compromised by the staff's manipulation of the student society. But, in turn, the pupils could subvert the freedoms offered to them with collective behaviour, and powerfully enforced group norms and sanctions, that were the anti-thesis of the school's most cherished values. And, thirdly, there was evidence to suggest that some of the former pupils found it difficult to adjust to the wider society, remained dependent on the school, and networks of former pupils, were somehow under-motivated in terms of conventional achievements, and that, rather than taking an active part in changing the world, they seemed to opt out into peripheral, artistic sub-cultures.

Whatever one thinks of the motives and mentality of the radical progressives and their practices, there is no doubt that an examination of the internal functioning of the progressive school is rewarding for the sociologist. In a sense it raises the root sociological problems of social order and social control, deviance, commitment and social cohesion, etc., that have exercised sociologists since the foundation of the discipline. In paring institutional restraints to a minimum and in endeavouring to maximize individual freedom, the progressives allow us to glimpse an alternative social order to the conformist one which surrounds most of us. However tarnished the reality becomes on close inspection, the ideal of freedom in education has a long ancestry and exerts a powerful attraction over contemporary educationists. It is the sociologist's task to scrutinise sceptically how that progressive ideology, of freedom for the child, gets translated into institutional practice. Hopefully, the resulting data can help to shape a framework for analyzing the 'Anti-School'.

Notes

- 1 This paper is based on research carried out between 1967-70 on Dartington and its former pupils, supported by the Elmgrant Trust, which is fully reported in: M. Punch, *Dartington Hall School*, Ph.d. Thesis, University of Essex, 1972. An earlier version of this paper was read at a seminar in the University of York, April 1974. A revised version of my doctorate will be published as: M. Punch: *The Progressive Retreat*, Cambridge University Press, Autumn 1976.
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- 14 Punch, 1972, Chapter six, 'Social Control'.
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- 19 For comparable remarks on the kibbutz see B. Bettelheim, *Children of the Dream*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1969.
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