

If education is one of our great socio-cultural institutions, one of the great bastions of western civilisation, then exactly what is its part in the overall performance? Is its function an essential one in a positive process of development? A process by which ideas, knowledge and skills are increased in such areas as science, art, etc. and according to a diachronic scale measurable by time in days or weeks or centuries? If so, then the results of such a development of knowledge and skills can certainly be identified in the patterns of industrial progress, the development of transportation to the extent of space travel, the example of photography, etc. To be sure, this is all upon a grand scale, and indeed, one could also point to the very grandness of the scale as a reason for the achievements. Development is surely a process, and one which is recognisable upon a broad scale within both space and time. Little isolated pockets of civilisation didn't produce the pyramids. Thus, without becoming diverted by the 'small is beautiful' thesis, I simply want to establish the nature of civilisation as part of the essential, but immensely extended processes of civilisation.

Ilich distinguished education from 'schooling', 'learning' being the natural daily process of socialisation, but for my own purposes here, I should like to make the distinction between centralised education and marginalised education, with the former including all the formal aspects of schooling as well as the mainstream of socialisation, whilst the latter encompasses all marginalised aspects, which can include deviant trends in informal school culture as well as any of the results of marginalised socialisation, from counter-culture trends in modern urbanised society to dying traditional customs as could be found in long established or ghetto neighbourhoods or in isolated or even not so isolated rural areas.

What I want to discuss is a paradox, a dichotomy, the contradictory situation that whilst the value of any knowledge, idea or skill often lies in its uniqueness or inaccessibility, yet its development or growth lies at the same time in its very universalisation or transference into a consensualised mechanism. Thus alchemy, with all its ancient associations with secrecy, is not unconnected with G.C.S.E. General Science. It seems that, to survive, things must become generalised, but that very generalisation involves simplification and thus a loss of everything which is not directly relevant; ghettos either die or vanish or survive and become nations and the consensus-focussing mechanism of education is essential in this process.

If at this point I introduce the concept of community education, in which my own field of welfare rights education is a recognisable component, the dichotomy can again be disclosed. Therefore, as communities become enabled and empowered according to the processes of community development, they move from a marginal situation which could no doubt be identified as alienated from the centralised power, whilst it could also be seen in terms of individual non-centralised clumps of value to be measured according to unique contexts rather than according to a consensus one.

In 1972, in a final attempt to retreat into the Brazilian Amazon jungle, a small band of 'undiscovered' indians known as the 'Kreen Akarore' burned its village which lay close to the route in which a new highway under construction was clearly proceeding. The escape finally failed and in early 1973, with shaven heads and bodies painted black, 30 indians entered the camp of Claudio Villas Boas, the Brazilian ethnologist. Gifts were tentatively exchanged and Claudio sent a radio message of the encounter with the indians to his brother Orlando, away in Sao Paulo: "Immediately, wire cables were monitored throughout the world. 'Civilisation,' as one American newspaper put it, had finally 'greeted' the elusive and hostile Kreen Akarore tribe." (1, pp. 70-71)

Anyone who has seen the recently released film, 'The Mission', will recognise the familiar theme of the little story above: a theme which, for the purposes of this speculation regarding education, I should like to propose as a two-fold one, including the physical destruction of a society/environment, but more importantly relevant to my approach as already developed, the fact of

the very nature of the 'greeting' of the forest tribe by 'civilisation'. Implicit in the concept of the 'civilised' is the uncivilised, just as 'education' implies the 'uneducated'; thus I use the controversial issue of development to epitomise the value-laden and ethnocentric aspects of education, well known through those such as Paolo Friere (2), who present education as an essential mechanism in the social structure of power relationships between oppressors and oppressed. Although the painter for whom I sat as a participant in his visual project upon 'education' holds a dead child centrally in focus, perhaps it is easier for us to recognise destruction from afar, for example, that of South American indian societies, overtly in the name of socio-economic development, covertly in that of the 'rational word', of the 'benefits' of civilisation, of the undisputed value of Western knowledge.

Yet just as Szasz (3) equated the marginal position of the 'mentally ill' with that of criminals or even witches, so Illich presents education as a social institution (4), whilst Karl Marx demonstrated the effect of alienation at every level of the capitalist system. Did these eminent 20th century minds sense the same danger which drove the Kreen Akarore to burn a village rather than be reached by the highway of civilisation? "The burden of the argument," wrote Bryan Wilson in his introduction to the collection entitled 'Rationality', "is that the categories of other cultures are not always translateable into our own." (5) In that case, why do we force our categories upon them? Why not leave the indians in the forest? One may as well ask, "Why not leave the Brazil nuts on the trees?", and every canny young Y.T.S. scheme employee knows very well why it is that they are cheap labour. So the Yoruba had to be taught that it is the round metal circles which they can acquire in exchange for their labour that are truly valuable, rather than the cowrie shells which they used 'mistakenly' to regard as precious? In the same manner, children must learn to value school, just as the baby had to come to terms with life outside the womb. But if the person who hates life sufficiently takes the option of suicide and if the indians die of loss of identity, is it all just a question of survival? And to survive is it that we indeed have to learn that to be small or marginal is to be deviant and to be deviant is to be dangerous because it is a threat to the large and the centralised. After all, "kids that bunk off school'll 'ave the welfare after 'em." Is education simply consensus survival through the imposition of the biggest value system?

Through an anecdote from my own childhood, I would like to introduce a more sinister note to this little discourse. At the age of eleven, I began at a new school, an English-American school in the north of Spain with a very liberal and creative approach to education. Not having begun school until the age of eight, my previous experience was not only sketchy, but also limited to a very strict southern Spanish convent where the main activities were memorising, copying and saying the rosary every afternoon, not to mention mass every morning; but at least this was all quite categorically unpleasant, making education for me an experience which I could confront and challenge as clearly as black contrasts white. What I am now about to relate involves a far more insidious, undermining and deadly aspect of the educational process. What I enjoyed most at my new school was English, since the Irish teacher with the lovely lilting voice absolutely seduced me, not only with the liquid tones with which she read poetry, but with the insistence that each week we should write at least one, if not two (!!) stories. I simply couldn't believe that such an entirely pleasurable activity could possibly be part of the school curriculum, since reading stories had been an addictive obsession with me ever since my mother had taught me to read. I therefore threw myself wholeheartedly and entirely into story writing until very soon I had filled a thick exercise book with richly illustrated tales all by my very own hand. Each was unique in subject, plot and description, in some way expressing an aspect of myself and my world. I suppose that I was also amazed at this new value which I could place on my personal experience in which, as a very shy, verbally inarticulate and solitary child, I cannot remember previously as having recognised any value at all.

The end of term, and time at which all exercise books were handed in, in order that they be awarded merit marks, arrived; my story book went along with all the others. I awaited their return with mounting anticipation in view of the high marks and encouragement which I had received from the English teacher, but my book was not amongst the others when they were handed back. I panicked, to be calmed by the English teacher's promise to get my book for me, but two weeks later there was still no sign of it and she advised me to go to the headmaster myself. I waited outside his office desperately, throughout a whole break-time, afraid to knock, especially since a dull weight in the pit of my stomach which I had not felt since my previous school was definitely present to warn me of the probable result of my enquiry. The headmaster finally emerged to confirm my fears by returning my question with the brusque observation that, since he marked all the books personally, none could possibly ever be lost and that I must definitely not have handed it in. My despair filled me with newly found courage and I opened my mouth to insist, but the headmaster was already receding down the corridor which began to turn and revolve to the rhythm of my thumping desperation. Unable to conceptualise it, I recognised through feeling the extent of my powerlessness and, although time is a great healer, I realise that belief in my own powerlessness is one of the main things which school taught me: that and an instinctive distrust of institutions as well as a possessive and over

protective attitude towards my own work.

I forgot the instance of the exercise book for many years, until the event was vividly recalled to me in my final year at university by an unjust accusation of plagiarism in my finals papers. Again I was swamped by the thumping feeling of powerlessness, of helpless vulnerability. This time, the visiting examiner visibly started as I entered the office to contest the decision and I realised that it was not what I said, but the fact that I was an attractive young woman that won me the case. Somehow the knowledge depressed me deeply, again in that acute manner which characterises the inexpressible. It was not until many years later that I was able to understand feminist or marxist issues in a personal sense.

To return to the main dialogue of my argument, if education is a mechanism of a centralised and consensus power structure, if it clearly encourages power hierarchies and gives power to the mainstream, the generally acceptable, then is education simply a bastion socio-cultural mediocrity? Is it clearly fundamentally a social safety pin, to hold firmly together a system by which so much shit is valued? Dare one ask what has in fact been lost - disregarded - in the name not just of educational standards, but in that 'western civilisation' itself? How much 'irrelevant' knowledge, skill and culture have we lost and, more importantly, of what nature and according to what quality, what values? The reply could be made to my question that, whatever the case, I am only questioning a natural and irrevocable process? Of course the probability of lost knowledge, etc., is regrettable, even unfortunate, as even more so is certainty of such casualties of the trend of socio-economic development as the thousands of decimated indians and the destroyed Amazonian forest, all in the name of progress, all an inevitable result. But a result of what? If it could be said that the situation in the so-called 'Third World' today is a result of western imperialism, which in turn was a result of the western socio-cultural values which prevailed at the time and were essentially contained in the education system of the time, surely it can be concluded that education is a mechanism towards the pervasion of consensus ignorance.

To reduce education to schools, where would it be without the children? Where would western imperialism have been without slaves or the conquistadores without the indians? It is a strange coincidence that many of our imported cash crops are addictive - sugar, coffee, tea, opium, tobacco, cocaine, to name but a few - whilst they also have little or no nutritional value. Wouldn't it make more humane sense to encourage the countries which grow these crops and which, incidentally, are mostly Third World countries, to grow a healthy variety of nutritional crops for their own consumption? Yet however humane sense such a suggestion might make it is as unlikely to make any sense according to the majority of contemporary values as would children not attending school make sense. Western addiction feeds off the loss of others just as the education system consumes the children's sense of freedom and power. My only conclusion can be that the day that education is not basically a power mechanism shall be the day that has seen national and international tribes of schoolchildren and the day when the Third World no longer exists to feed the west. Education today is the process of control.

- 1 Shelton H. Davies, Victims of the Miracle.
- 2 Paolo Friere, Pedagogy of the Oppressed.
- 3 Thomas S. Szasz, The Myth of Mental Illness.
- 4 Ivan Illich, De-schooling Society.
- 5 Bryan Wilson (ed.), Rationality.