

The Outlook for Social Justice in Our Compulsory Schools: An Anarchist Forecast

Author: David Gabbard

Professor

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

East Carolina University

gabbardd@ecu.edu

Tel : 252-367-9768

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Writing for Salon.com in May of 2007, Gary Kamiya pondered how George W. Bush, in light of his administration's incessant abuses of power, had avoided impeachment during his Presidency. Bush's "problems go far beyond Iraq," Kamiya wrote. "His administration has been dogged by one massive scandal after the other, from the Katrina debacle, to Bush's approval of illegal wiretapping and torture, to his unparalleled use of "signing statements" to disobey laws that he disagreed with, to the outrageous Gonzales and U.S. attorneys affair" (Kamiya , 2007). So, why wasn't he impeached?

For Kamiya, the main reason was obvious when viewed from the perspective of realpolitik. The Democrats, with their narrow majority in Congress at the time, did not have the political will to do so. In weighing the potential costs and benefits of such a move, they feared that impeachment could backfire on them. They preferred to give Bush enough rope to hang the Republican Party in the 2008 elections.

Kamiya, however, also identified a deeper and more troubling reason that Bush was not impeached. This reason had less to do with either Bush or the Democratic Party, and more with us – the American people. "Bush's warmongering," Kamiya contended,

spoke to something deep in our national psyche. The emotional force behind America's support for the Iraq war, the molten core of an angry, resentful patriotism, is still too hot for Congress, the media and even many Americans who oppose the war, to confront directly. It's a national myth. It's John Wayne. To impeach Bush would force

us to directly confront our national core of violent self-righteousness – come to terms with it, understand it and reject it. And we’re not ready to do that (emphasis added).

In coming to terms with and understanding our national core of violent self-righteous, we would have to acknowledge what underlies it. We would have to recognize, as Cornel West argues in *Democracy Matters*, that

the American democratic experiment is unique in human history not because we are God's chosen people to lead the world, nor because we are always a force for good in the world, but because of our refusal to acknowledge the deeply racist and imperial roots of our democratic project. We are exceptional because of our denial of the antidemocratic foundation stones of American democracy. No other democratic nation revels so blatantly in such self-deceptive innocence, such self-paralyzing reluctance to confront the night-side of its own history. This sentimental flight from history – or adolescent escape from painful truths about ourselves – means that even as we grow old, grow big, and grow powerful, we have yet to grow up. (2004, 41).

And whereas Kamiya simply asserts, “we need therapy,” West offers a more specific prescription. West calls for the enactment of “democratic paideia – the cultivation of an active, informed citizenry – in order to preserve and deepen our democratic experiment,” (Ibid) coupled with parrhesia – frank and fearless speech – that is the lifeblood of any democracy” (Ibid, 209). Such measures are necessary, he contends, if we are to escape “our self-deceptive innocence” and our “self-paralyzing reluctance to confront the night-side of [our] own history.”

Educators committed to a pedagogy of social justice would eagerly answer West’s call for fearless speech in service of what they hold to be one of the most important missions of America’s schools – “the cultivation of an active, informed citizenry.” Tragically, however, no one knows the sting of America’s “violent self-righteousness” better than those same educators. Even before Bill O’Reilly of Fox News Channel, the official network of violent self-righteousness, launched the national demonization campaign against University of Colorado Professor Ward Churchill, the Monroe County Community Schools Corporation in Bloomington, Indiana declined to renew the contract of Deborah Mayer, an elementary school teacher. Mayer’s transgression occurred while discussing the December 13, 2002 issue *Time for Kids*, a children’s version of *Time* magazine that was a regular part of the curriculum. That issue contained a story covering a peace march in Washington D.C. protesting the pending U.S. invasion of Iraq, which led a student to ask Mayer if she “would ever be in a peace march.” Mayer informed the class that whenever she drove past marchers holding up signs asking motorists to “Honk For Peace” that she honked. She also told the children that she thought people “should seek peaceful solutions before going to war.” The class then discussed a

conflict resolution program at their own school, and they dropped the subject. Shortly afterward, however, a Bush-supporting parent brought a complaint against Mayer before the building principal, and the district later refused to renew her contract (Egelko, 2007).

Judge Sarah Evans Barker ruled against Mayer in her wrongful termination suit, arguing “teachers, including Ms. Mayer, do not have a right under the First Amendment to express their opinions during the instructional period” (Global Research, 2006). Later, in the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, famed neoliberal jurist and Chief Judge Frank H. Easterbrook upheld Barker’s ruling. “Expression,” Easterbrook wrote, “is a teacher’s stock in trade, the commodity she sells to her employer in exchange for a salary” (emphasis added) (Egelko, 2007). Though she plans a further appeal, Mayer holds little optimism that the Supreme Court will take her case. If the decision stands, particularly in light of the neoliberal logic found in Easterbrook’s ruling, we can abandon all but the slimmest of hopes that schools will ever become sites for pursuing social justice. In that case, perhaps the time has arrived for us to take the anarchist critique of education more seriously and recognize the futility of pushing for democratic educational reforms. Maybe we should begin considering the possibility that we might best pursue social justice, not by reforming schools, but by resisting state-controlled systems of compulsory schooling altogether.

The Anarchist Critique

When he published *What is Property* in 1840, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon became the first person to call himself an anarchist. He was not, however, the first person to call for the abolition of the state. For this reason, scholarship traces the anarchist tradition back to William Godwin. Credited with developing the first comprehensive anarchist critique of government schools in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* in 1793, Godwin viewed freedom of thought as fundamental to political liberty. As Joel Spring explains, Godwin believed that “since people constantly improve their reasoning power and their understanding of nature, their understanding of the best form of government is constantly changing” (Spring, 1994, 42). While he recognized that education was crucial toward the development of individuals’ powers of rational thought that would guide them in self-government, Godwin also, Spring notes, “considered national systems of education one of the foremost dangers to freedom and liberty” (cited in Spring, 1983, 68). “‘Before we put so powerful a machine (education) under the direction of so ambiguous an agent (government),’” Godwin warned, “‘it behooves us to consider well what it is we do. Government will not fail to employ it, to strengthen its hands, and perpetuate its institutions.’” (cited in Spring, 1994, 42).

Indeed, Godwin’s warning gives us good reason to question whether government-controlled schools can ever function as sites where students cultivate their powers of reasoning in the service of social justice. Furthermore, Godwin also provokes us

to consider the extent to which schools, as instruments of state power, have contributed more to what Kamiya identifies as our “our national core of violent self-righteousness” than they have to cultivating the “active, informed citizenry” called for by Cornel West.

Echoing Godwin’s concerns and armed with 200 years of historical hindsight, contemporary anarchist theorist Noam Chomsky describes “the basic institutional role and function of the schools” as providing “an ideological service: there’s a real selection for obedience and conformity”(Chomsky, 2003, 27-28). In Chomsky’s analysis, compulsory government schooling brings children at a very early age into an indoctrination system “that works against independent thought in favor of obedience” with the goal of keeping people “from asking questions that matter about important issues that directly affect them and others” (Chomsky and Macedo, 2000, 24). In Deborah Mayer’s case, of course, the important issue was the pending invasion of Iraq. Keep in mind that a student initiated the conversation concerning Mayer’s participation in peace marches. Therefore, the decision of the school board and courts’ rulings on that decision sent a clear message to students as well as teachers: “We don’t discuss ‘questions that matter’ about issues that might interest you.” That message, of course, underscores Chomsky’s thesis that schools function to discourage independent inquiry and promote obedience and conformity.

Emma Goldman made similar observations early in the 20th Century. “What, then, is the school of today?” she asked. “It is for the child what the prison is for the convict and the barracks for the soldier – a place where everything is being used to break the will of the child, and then to pound, knead, and shape it into a being utterly foreign to itself.... It is but part of a system which can maintain itself only through absolute discipline and uniformity” (Goldman, 1912).

Goldman’s description of schools receives considerable support in the more heavily analytic writings of Michel Foucault. In books such as *Madness and Civilization* (1988) and *Discipline and Punish* (1995), Foucault points out for us a very peculiar historical oddity. Systems of government-sponsored compulsory schooling did, in fact, begin to emerge at the same point in history as the modern prison, and each was modeled on the Army barracks. Compulsory schooling of the masses has always had less to do with education and more to do with discipline. By “discipline”, Foucault refers to a form of treatment that

Increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes those same forces (in terms of political obedience). In short, it disassociates powers from the body; on the one hand it turns it into an ‘aptitude,’ a ‘capacity,’ which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjugation. If economic exploitation separates the force of and the product of labor, let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination. (Ibid, 141).

Moreover, compulsory schooling functions to discipline individuals in a manner that increases the productive power that their bodies offer to the economic system while simultaneously diminishing their power to resist economic exploitation and the political system that initiates that exploitation by compelling students to attend school in the first place.

The writings of Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and recognized “father of American psychiatry”, are particularly illuminative of how the early advocates of compulsory schooling viewed the importance of diminishing individuals’ powers of resistance by building up their emotional attachments to the state. Rush wrote his “Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic” in 1786 – just seven years before Godwin wrote his Enquiry Concerning Political Justice. Rush declared “the principle of patriotism stands in need of the reinforcement of prejudice, and it is well known that our strongest prejudices in favor of our country are formed in the first one and twenty years of our lives Our schools of learning,” he argued, “by producing one general and uniform system of education, will render the mass of the people more homogeneous and thereby fit them more easily for uniform and peaceable government” (Rush, 1793). The quotes below come from the same document:

In order more effectually to secure to our youth the advantages of a religious education, it is necessary to impose upon them the doctrines and discipline of a particular church. Man is naturally an ungovernable animal, and observations on particular societies and countries will teach us that when we add the restraints of ecclesiastical to those of domestic and civil government, we produce in him the highest degrees of order and virtue . . .

Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property. Let him be taught to love his family, but let him be taught at the same time that he must forsake and even forget them when the welfare of his country requires it

In the education of youth, let the authority of our masters be as absolute as possible. The government of schools like the government of private families should be arbitrary, that it may not be severe. By this mode of education, we prepare our youth for the subordination of laws and thereby qualify them for becoming good citizens of the republic. I am satisfied that the most useful citizens have been formed from those youth who have never known or felt their own wills till they were one and twenty years of age, and I have often thought that society owes a great deal of its order and happiness to the deficiencies of parental government being supplied by those habits of obedience and subordination which are contracted at schools

From the observations that have been made it is plain that I consider it as possible to convert men into republican machines. This must be done if we expect them to perform their parts properly in the great machine of the government of the state. (Rush, 1793)

Noah Webster, known as “the schoolmaster of America,” could not have agreed more. “Good republicans,” Webster wrote, “are formed by a singular machinery in the body politic, which takes the child as soon as he can speak, checks his natural independence and passions, makes him subordinate to superior age, to the laws of the state, to town and parochial institutions”(Spring 2005, 48-49). Webster’s real significance as a force in shaping the direction of American education and culture rests with his creation of a series of books that were the major school texts in 19th century America, selling over a million and a half copies by 1801 and 75 million copies by 1875. As Webster’s biographer, Harry Warfel, characterized them, ““this series of unified textbooks effectually shaped the destiny of American education for a century. Imitators sprang up by the dozens, and each echoed the Websterian nationalism. The word ‘American became indispensable in all textbook titles; all vied in patriotic eloquence’” (Ibid, 48).

We are able to trace, then, the roots of Kamiya’s “national core of violent self-righteousness” right back to the very beginnings of America’s experiment with compulsory schooling. “Our schools,” wrote a veteran schoolteacher in 1910, “have failed because they rest on compulsion and constraint. . . It is deemed possible and important that all should be interested in the same things, in the same sequence, and at the same time. . . Under the circumstances (of 1910) teachers are mere tools, automatons who perpetuate a machine that turns out automatons” (Goldman, 1912).

Under the conditions of 2007, nearly a hundred years later, how little has changed. With Emma Goldman, we should recognize that under the enduring conditions of government-sponsored, compulsory schooling, “the child becomes stunted, that its mind is dulled, and that its very being is warped, thus making it unfit to take its place in the social struggle as an independent factor. Indeed, there is nothing so hated so much in the world today as independent factors in whatever line” (Ibid).

Room for Hope?

The anarchist critique of compulsory schooling leaves us little room for hope that our schools will ever promote social justice. Given the contemporary neoliberal push to privatize the management of schools, however, even that small glimmer of hope is fading quickly.

Rather than focusing our efforts to transform schools so heavily on the direct empowerment of teachers, perhaps we should take a lesson from the playbook of the political right. They have grown effective in gaining control of democratically

elected, local school boards. Educators interested creating schools as democratic, public spheres for the advancement of social justice must begin working locally to change the face, as well as the democratic dispositions, of our local school boards to allow our teachers greater freedom to teach, and our students greater freedom to learn.

As severe as the rulings of Judges Barker and Easterbrook may sound to our ears, they merely stated that teachers must adhere to the curricular policies set by their employer. Except in those districts where curricular decisions are now effectively controlled by private management firms (educational management organizations or EMOs), that “employer” is a democratically elected, school board. Only when local school boards begin recognizing and acknowledging the crucial link between education and democracy, through concrete policy decisions on curriculum and other matters, will schools ever be able to meaningfully address issue of social justice.

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