

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Education and the Democratic Myth

George Cairncross

1971

George Cairncross
Education and the Democratic Myth
1971

Freedom, Volume 32, (October 2, 1971)
reprinted in and scanned from: Contemporary Anarchism
edited by Terry M. Perlin (Transaction Books, New
Brunswick, New Jersey, 1979, page 203 ff)

theanarchistlibrary.org

A democratic system is that form of system which is governed by the rule of the majority. The Democratic way, is that way by which the majority, through the exercise of the electoral vote at a secret ballot, select the form of government, which they as a majority, wish to rule the society in which they live. However, in this society, there will exist a minority of groupings and individuals who, although not in agreement with the majority, nevertheless have to abide by the decisions of the government empowered by the majority vote, any protest they may like to make, is on the whole ineffectual. If an individual wishes to make some form of protest, there exist established channels open to him. This however, is not protesting, but merely conforming to the prescribed order of things. This is the Democratic way, the minority living under the rule of the majority decision. John Stuart Mill, the Victorian Economist and Philosopher, once wrote: "The majority is a majority of individuals, and that for the majority to suppress the opinions of the minority is to challenge the very foundations upon which majority rule itself is ultimately based." This is the

chief crack in the structure of Democracy, the individual can be and often is suppressed. The only remedy open to the minority groupings, is that at another election to hope for a change in the majority vote, so that another government can replace the one with which they are not satisfied. Thus another majority vote establishes another ruling power, but there will again remain the minority. Can a Democracy be converted into a more Libertarian form of society in which the individual rather than a majority or a minority be catered for? Again John Stuart Mill wrote: "that if the State ensured that each individual within that State was happy, then that State would be automatically happy."

Behind the Democracy lies the all-powerful, ever pervasive shadow of the State; and by the State I mean the Government, the Established Church, the Police Forces, the Armed Forces and the Educational System. Society, where the electorate stems from, lives within the auspices of the State. the ultimate authority in the Democracy lies with the State. An electoral change only implies the transfer of power from one body politic to another, the State Apparatus remains to a varying degree intact, and it is with the State that the ultimate decisions concerning the running of society remains.

We have seen that the Head of a State is decided by electoral majority vote. The State by reason of its very existence and the fact that the educational system is State controlled, decides the policy as regards the running of the educational system of the country. A child is faced with two major environments, the home and the school. At home, the child is subject to the values and pressures of his family, who in turn are subject to the values and pressures of society as a whole. At school, the child is subject to the values and standards of the State educational system, his teachers and school peers, eventually he in turn becomes a parent and perpetuates the same standards and values, which on the whole parallel those of society, to his children. In the long run, the State to survive, has to rule a so-

ciety that accepts the authority of that State. The only way the State can ensure that this will happen, is by perpetuating a society that is conditioned to believe in the State and not in the existence of the sovereign individual, cooperating freely with other sovereign individuals. Martin Buber has said: "Freedom is a condition of education." The school system therefore has to be geared to producing a society which will accept without question this premise, and this plays a great part in the machinery of conformity. Thus it becomes apparent that the educational system cannot be geared to producing self-thinking individuals but has to be geared to the producing of indoctrinated persons who will accept that the Democratic way is the best form of society and government. G.H. Bantock says: "Education can only be understood when we know for what society and for what social position the pupils are being educated. Education does not mould men in the abstract but in and for a given society."

Ours is a competitive society. The majority accept this situation and act out their desires for self-improvement in this atmosphere. Surely it is not irrelevant that the whole system of schooling is one in which success is rewarded and failure punished. Not only this, but the success of one person is the failure of another—the failure and humiliation of having failed in front of the whole class. Success at school becomes equated with successful examination results, a philosophy which carries over into most homes just as success in society is equated with reaching a position of high financial reward in the hierarchy of one's own chosen field of work. An authoritarian system must by necessity encourage a hierarchy and not only that, but a hierarchy that it can trust. Those who conform to the standards and values laid down by the conditioning and indoctrination of their particular social groupings in society, and through the successful attainment of qualifications eventually reach a recognizable position within the structure of society; a position which could be threatened by any signs of Libertarianistic individuals challenging the social structure. The individual has to

be curbed either by seduction to the accepted norm, and if this fails, then by repression. Anti-social behavior cannot be tolerated and eventually the individual who refuses to accept the values of the society in which he exists, is then met with the full force of the law (or sometimes more subtly by social stigmatisation or ostracism). The law, which is enacted by society for the good of the people in that society, whether or not they have desired it, on the principle that a democratic government acts for the majority.

The same attitudes apply to a child in school. The education system reflects the values and standards of society and the child is expected to conform to the system within the school. A pupil hierarchy is often established by the appointment of prefects, house or team captains, etc., combined with such methods as team points or a star system for good work or behavior. Children who show any signs of rebellion are considered trouble makers and are effectively punished in one way or another. Thus, just as in adult society, the individual has to appear to go along with society if he is to have any sort of a peaceful existence, and if not, then he must be prepared to take the full brunt of society's displeasure, so must the child in the school. Short of revolution, education is the only way that a society can be changed from within. Adults, as much as children, have to be educated to the idea of a new society for the old one to be superseded. A society that considers itself and its values to be responsible and just, is not likely of its own volition, to countenance a change in its structure through the educational system. As Mill said: "The majority, being satisfied with the ways of mankind as they now are (for it is they who make them what they are), cannot comprehend why those ways should not be good enough for everybody." It is only the minority individuals within a society who will desire any great change in that society, and as it is not in society's interest to encourage the individual in his aspirations, then the individual must ultimately suffer through the educational process in a Democratic system,

which believes in the rule of the majority over the minority.