

TERRY BLOCHER

# Home on the Range: The School Pen

The form of a home is defined by its walls. What is limited directly determines an object's material size and potential. The space something occupies denies the presence of another. When a wall is erected, it often creates a barrier by excluding the outside from the inside, effectively cutting off a space not only physically but mentally. This phenomenon could qualify as a cold hard fact, an extension of social atomism, science, architecture, and reason. One could see a human longing for these walls from the tallest skyscraper to the most humble teepee. Based on will, this collective desire, being limiting in its nature, has the capacity to limit us further. It is this capacity for containment which the nation states of the world saw fit to fulfill. A school, through its physical structure, serves to assert the state's authority, legitimacy, and power. The boundaries of these places of learning are not accidental. These boundaries inwardly resonate the message of its creator in the minds of the students. In effect, the school has a disciplinary function and acts as a prison one might leave, yet can never escape. Rather than control for control's sake, these forces encapsulate the pessimistic spirit of American democracy itself.

One could say that the form of a school follows its function. After all, investments well beyond billions of dollars in taxpayer, or private, money in the form of a sprawl of schools would require some attention to detail. Now, this paper will not discuss efficiency, efficacy, and competence in a school's given goal; however, the function of a school, manifested in its form, remains clear. A school, in its physical and ideational structure, maintains the goal of limiting the freedom of those attending. There are many ways to reduce freedom. There are iron bars, rules, regulations, walls which cannot be climbed or broken to name a few. One could find these things almost anywhere in society, on a farm, in a city's downtown area, in a person's home, etcetera. The difference between the latter places and a school is its recognized right to compel students to attend. At this point, one might object that a school is a necessary and invaluable place to guide young people through their personal development—even to the point that they are compelled and organized in such a way as to reduce their freedom. On the other hand, there exists an excessiveness and poignancy in these regulations which does not lend itself to any kind of personal education of the student. More

accurately, part of that education—if not the whole—aims to capture the student's mind. Just as a Roman wall might be called a defense against barbarian Visigoths, a school fence might be called a defense against school shooters and child predators.

Yet a fence is not a wall and the ones employed across America are not employed to deter those who might hurt students, but to target the students. To say a fence is not a wall may be an overstatement of its physicality. The fence and its boundaries can create walls within the minds of attending students. If actions follow from their surrounding life-world, then the fences mold behavior. No one growing to the age of eighteen and perhaps beyond is allowed to see beyond the bars of these fences, that is, we are trained to limit our own freedom by believing those bars cannot be breached conventionally. Another device which targets students uniquely is the metal detector. These evaluators of some of the most extreme threats in society are entirely linked with suspicion and control over behavior. Though they do have a role in discouraging violence at school, some studies show they also correlate with fear and feelings of lack of safety.<sup>1</sup> Only by following rules and attending school, the institution, can freedom be bought. Thus, freedom has become a commodity, an access point through which we are led to believe we possess only on the good graces of those who instruct us and those who create the rules.

Discipline forms a basis of the school's curriculum. It should come as no surprise that nations ready for war would translate the same attitude into the minds of the young: desks are set in rows—ranks—to follow the lead of one authority figure. A student's learning reality is set in such a way as that they acknowledge a hierarchy. This common factory seating arrangement exists as a training manual. With it, a student comes to believe in their own right of a reason to follow orders; the definition of a good student in this setting means one who does not disrupt or change the order. This sort of stability suits a war machine more than an education. Excessive force is applied in the uniformity of classrooms, and the result is an extension of the State's will into those classrooms. But in no way does the ideology of the circular sitting arrangement—with its sacred aura—rid the classroom of its spatial indoctrination and regimentation. If the lineal chair arrangement signals a hierarchical or more Republican gesture, the soft discipline of the circle resonates with the Liberal and Politically Correct order of things! If students come to see figures in front of the classroom as central, it follows that that behavior would emerge to support pre existing orders. Students are trained to see whoever exists in the highest positions as someone with inherent power and say-so in any discussion. This transformation of the mind acts more unconsciously than not. Just as those who must state they have power but have none, a classroom's projected authority acts wordlessly. When shown the face of what education calls reality, there is little alternative.

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Hankin, A. , Hertz, M. and Simon, T. (2011), *Impacts of Metal Detector Use in Schools: Insights From 15 Years of Research\**. *Journal of School Health*, 81: 100-106. doi:10.1111 /j.1746-1561.2010.00566.

Enter Michel Foucault, who wrote extensively about justice and authority, and the forms of discipline that take shape. The reality of physical control manifests itself not only in the ordering of desks but also through the projected mindset of a student. The degree of healthy living is defined by a person's self-control over their body. Foucault wrote about the emergence of timetables and ordering in the enlightenment: "The time-table is an old inheritance. The strict model was no doubt suggested by the monastic communities. It soon spread. Its three great methods establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, regulate the cycles of repetition and were soon to be found in schools, workshops and hospitals."<sup>2</sup> In this ongoing case, the compulsion of time brings people in line. Rather than a natural framework, classroom time acts as a wordless message of order which prepares the student to conform to the worktime clock. Part of a student's outward appearance involves this level of control when it comes to sitting up straight, by not raising their voice or otherwise making a nuisance, and through exercise.

Foucault comments about similar studies of soldier training. In this commentary, Foucault introduces a pattern of behavior involved when groups of people are forced to act the same way: ... "We have passed from a form of injunction that measured or punctuated gestures to a web that constrains them or sustains them throughout their entire succession. A sort of anatomo-chronological schema of behaviour is defined. The act is broken down into its elements; the position of the body, limbs, articulations is defined; to each movement are assigned a direction, an aptitude, a duration; their order of succession is prescribed. Time penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power."<sup>3</sup> Where exercise might build a more healthy person, the orderly discipline of a student's rigidity stems from the institution's penchant for creating hegemony in groups. Whether a physical education class or the ordering of persons in a classroom, specific movements are expected and enforced in accordance with time. The traditional standard of discipline has a predominant side effect of creating a bubble of conformity which punishes not only different ways of sitting but different avenues of thought. When a person measures a standard of good to follow that of what their peers do, breaking the mindset proves difficult and anxiety creating.

More than physical constraints, the barrier that keeps students in order is human surveillance. In public schools, the watchful eyes of cameras, teachers and hall monitors create areas of denial (that is, zones of perceived danger students dare not cross). Classrooms being outfitted with the latest technology verge on more than privacy, they create passive surveillance of a student's life. Foucault also touches upon Bentham's prison design of the Panopticon. This type of surveillance observable in public institutions from prisons to schools is an effective means of utilizing a limited number of watchers to survey a 360-degree angle twenty-four hours a day. This system works because it implants a suspicion that people in these areas are always being watched.<sup>4</sup> It is one matter to institute incentives to keep a person's unwanted impulses in check; cameras of this nature create areas of danger in the minds of students. Coupled with the ever present guards of teachers and hall monitors

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Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage, 2009.

3

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage, 2009.

4

Ibid.

keeping watch, the school system creates an effective ring of jail wardens to keep students inside. Regardless of whether students learn from what is being taught or wish themselves to learn, these fundamental walls of observation seek to keep these students permanently under wraps. These measures weave a constant and reliable reality which demands a degree of obedience from those attending. As discussed before, these areas of control do not exist simply for control's sake, they act in a manner which bestows more power to the administrative grid.

We come full circle to the founding tenets of America and by effect, its powerful historical influence worldwide. The United States adopts an inherently pessimistic attitude with its system of checks and balances on the government and structure of the country. In its very balance of power in politics, it establishes a mistrust of human nature.<sup>5</sup> In its conduct, the country declares an inherent lack of reason in the positions of power. One need only look to the influences of the constitution's writers to gain a more complete picture of their attitude. John Adams wrote to his son about his education saying, "There is no History, perhaps, better adapted to this usefull Purpose than that of Thucidides, an Author, of whom I hope you will make yourself perfect Master..."<sup>6</sup> As was a proper education at Adam's time, the Greeks were a common and important influence. Thucydides acts as a significant milestone in scientific history for his attempt to relate both sides of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides talks about the carnage in the city Corcyra on the island of Corfu. Thucydides details the class warfare among Corcyra's people:

<sup>5</sup>  
Refer to Thomas Hobbes

<sup>6</sup>  
Adams, John. Received by John Quincy Adams, 11 Aug. 1777, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

DURING SEVEN DAYS THAT EURYMEDON STAYED WITH HIS SIXTY SHIPS, THE CORCYRAEANS WERE ENGAGED IN BUTCHERING THOSE OF THEIR FELLOW CITIZENS WHOM THEY REGARDED AS THEIR ENEMIES: AND ALTHOUGH THE CRIME IMPUTED WAS THAT OF ATTEMPTING TO PUT DOWN THE DEMOCRACY, SOME WERE SLAIN ALSO FOR PRIVATE HATRED, OTHERS BY THEIR DEBTORS BECAUSE OF THE MONEYS OWED TO THEM. DEATH THUS RAGED IN EVERY SHAPE; AND, AS USUALLY HAPPENS AT SUCH TIMES, THERE WAS NO LENGTH TO WHICH VIOLENCE DID NOT GO; SONS WERE KILLED BY THEIR FATHERS, AND SUPPLIANTS DRAGGED FROM THE ALTAR OR SLAIN UPON IT; WHILE SOME WERE EVEN WALLED UP IN THE TEMPLE OF DIONYSUS AND DIED THERE.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>  
Thucydides, et al. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Penguin Books, 1990.

This event sticks out in history for the petty and thus preventable nature of its violence, to which Thucydides adds in detailing the extent of damage done and the specific reasons,

THE CAUSE OF ALL THESE EVILS WAS THE LUST FOR POWER ARISING FROM GREED AND AMBITION; AND FROM THESE PASSIONS PROCEEDED THE VIOLENCE OF PARTIES ONCE ENGAGED IN CONTENTION. THE LEADERS IN THE CITIES, EACH PROVIDED WITH THE FAIREST PROFESSIONS, ON THE ONE SIDE WITH THE CRY OF POLITICAL EQUALITY OF THE PEOPLE, ON THE OTHER OF A MODERATE ARISTOCRACY, SOUGHT PRIZES FOR THEMSELVES

IN THOSE PUBLIC INTERESTS WHICH THEY PRETENDED TO CHERISH, AND, RECOILING FROM NO MEANS IN THEIR STRUGGLES FOR ASCENDANCY ENGAGED IN THE DIREST EXCESSES; IN THEIR ACTS OF VENGEANCE THEY WENT TO EVEN GREATER LENGTHS, NOT STOPPING AT WHAT JUSTICE OR THE GOOD OF THE STATE DEMANDED, BUT MAKING THE PARTY CAPRICE OF THE MOMENT THEIR ONLY STANDARD, AND INVOKING WITH EQUAL READINESS THE CONDEMNATION OF AN UNJUST VERDICT OR THE AUTHORITY OF THE STRONG ARM TO GLUT THE ANIMOSITIES OF THE HOUR. THUS RELIGION WAS IN HONOUR WITH NEITHER PARTY; BUT THE USE OF FAIR PHRASES TO ARRIVE AT GUILTY ENDS WAS IN HIGH REPUTATION. MEANWHILE THE MODERATE PART OF THE CITIZENS PERISHED BETWEEN THE TWO, EITHER FOR NOT JOINING IN THE QUARREL, OR BECAUSE ENVY WOULD NOT SUFFER THEM TO ESCAPE.<sup>8</sup>

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Ibid.

Parallels of later American fears find themselves here. Thucydides unveils a terrible and untamable human ambition which he claims forms a basis for the destruction in Corcyra, and by implication, in many conflicts. Destruction and needless conflict lie squarely on man's shoulders. Thucydides' message is to say that the mobs of killers in Corcyra had reasons for what they did and by implication, we do as well. This view of nature stands today set into the foundations of American democracy. As shown by the system of checks and balances with the explicit purpose of limiting the power of any one branch of government, the United States adopts an outlook of mistrust towards the people within. If form follows function, schools might just stand as a manifestation of this same inward criticism. With a standardization and submission to authority not unlike a society preparing for a riot, the form of schools does resemble this doctrine of checking power. Walls and structure act as a seemingly effective means of preventing unwanted movements and opinions.

A mainline of barriers are thrust on the young and those wanting to learn. The norm for a school is to block access for what is thought of as an impressionable and possibly rowdy demographic. Rather than for protection, a school's walls exist for control. A paper which says someone should sit in a certain room at a certain time is exerted control. But the modern school does more than provide that paper. The modern school has a slew of devices which act physically in space-time and mentally in terms of the politicization of curriculum and class content. By today's standards Bentham's Panopticon—which was built on industrial standards of technology—is outdated! The new forms of control and compliance are operationally dictated by the information machine itself. Now students, along with administrators and teachers, must comply in real time to the imperatives of digital telematics—all must be, at all times, accessible, locatable, and active as nodal units in the feedback loop of the information education machine. The reason for control is plain. Control is meant to mitigate its opposite, chaos. The chaos and slaughter Thucydides accounts for is one such example to which America's founders sought

to avoid. That spirit of control echoes today, though its extent reaches levels of harmful paranoia. One might remark that education in America resembles fear itself. Like an individual mind, it might be healthier if certain repression came to the surface and could be discussed. Much thought behind these instituted forms of control is likely lost in the collective eye of both policymakers and the public as a whole. The question of whether education has a more open alternative is still unvoiced and underutilized to the extent that people consciously acknowledge and put thought into it.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>

Hankin, A. , Hertz, M. and Simon, T. (2011),  
Impacts of Metal Detector Use in Schools:  
Insights From 15 Years of Research\*. Journal of  
School Health, 81: 100-106. doi:10.1111/j.1746-  
1561.2010.00566.x

<sup>2</sup>

Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish: The  
Birth of the Prison. Vintage, 2009.

<sup>3</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>

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War. Penguin Books, 1990.

<sup>8</sup>

Ibid.