

Casey Baldwin

The Institution As A Message

"We don't know who discovered water, but we are pretty sure it wasn't the fish"... McLuhans one-liner illustrating the difficulty of assessing our environment. And "the medium is the message" approach which attempts to circumvent these difficulties on the realistic premise that an analysis of the medium allows a more contemporary insight than an analysis focusing exclusively on antiquated content. This premise is especially valuable when applied to education and schools. Edgar Friedenburg, professor of Sociology and Education at the State University of New York in Buffalo, recently gave a guest lecture at York University using this approach. Talking to a class of Professor George Martell (recent Dalhousie honours graduate), he defined the purpose of education without reference to curriculum or content, instead focusing entirely on the school as an institution, and answering the question in terms of social function.

The most important social function of schools, he maintains, is to define youth as a social role. Our society is based on fragmentation, a vital systematized string of categories, nurtured by our print heritage. Most of our social order is based on compartmentalization, vital to our perception and subsequent conceptualization. Youth is subjected to this as early as possible, the school providing the principal exposure. Compulsory school attendance sets youth in a compartment all their own, the only major social category where it is illegal to be anywhere you please during certain hours. Schools usurp student life-space even after hours, a good example being mandatory short hair, which can't suddenly grow after class. The schools vigorously defend this on the grounds of character building, disregarding the fact the student has no say in the matter whatever. It is likely a majority of students would like to have some say in the character and frequency of ads strengthening their "character". If any degree of consent was involved in rules of behaviour and what he wished to learn, the student would then be a client, with the school no longer an institution of mass definition, but rather the more democratic institution it now purports to be.

The second function Friedenburg discussed is to legitimize an economic conspiracy, not a conspiracy in any dark satanic sense, but a type of invidious planning. The "a priori" assumption that schooling later provides a higher income with a concomitant increase in social mobility is open to question. It is true there is an almost universal hiring policy based on school credentials, but if you don't hire without these credentials its impossible to know whether the job could have been done without them, or to discover alternative modes of providing the learning that is ostensibly required; and impossible

to establish what the school really contributed to the acquisition of skills necessary to the performance of the job. Further, if the schools are largely responsible for the acquisition of these skills and there isn't anywhere else to acquire them, its a long way from proving its the best place to do so.

The highly touted correlation between earning power and education is increasingly suspect. Comparison between the earning power of the non-high school graduate and the graduate shows a difference in earnings of only twenty to thirty dollars a month. The standard reply is that its necessary for university admission. A high school education was only valuable when scarce, so the only allowable deduction is that the top ten per cent of society with resources not to earn money and go to school were likely to earn more money over the long run than those who didn't. With increasingly universal education, the same drop in fiscal utility is affecting college degrees. Thus the economic carrot forcing student acceptance of the schools undemocratic definitive role is shrinking, and the student begins to object to the role. The majority of students still accept being quite rigidly defined and molded, and as such are still useful to the corporation and industry. They emerge graduates with marketable characteristics that allow them a comfortable industrial niche with a static productive role, the role the school so carefully defined.

Friedenburg says the school as a medium or institution is indeed the message, more so than most other mass media. The curriculum content isn't nearly as important as learning acceptable modes of behaviour and inter-action. Tests on curriculum measure exposure to this social function as much as they do knowledge of algebra etc. Schools provide a caricature of society, and when the student emerges a full blown graduate from this mimic sub-strate into society, his awareness has been duly anaesthetized and conditioned. Friedenburg says, "The function of the school is to teach you about the unofficial sanctions, to prepare you for the blacklist, to make sure you understand the implications of being labelled a troublemaker, the worst thing a school can call you."

It performs this function in a society that lies about its traditions. Society ennobles traditions far greater than it can institutionalize in every-day practise. Friedenburg says one reason for this is the inclusion in the social process, with some influence, of people, who in an earlier more conservative age, would have been non-voting and dispossessed. The response of the school to wider education has done it less than credit. It isn't educating people of less ability, but former victims

of the exploitative process, the victims of economic laissez faire. With greater democracy and social conscience, but the same exploitative framework, society must create and maintain institutions that persuade people to be victims. These institutions attempt to induce people, through anxiety, no sense of their own resources, or a realistic sense they might not be smart enough to be rulers, to choose the role of victim.

Teaching increased economic opportunity along with more generous cultural values to more and more people without educating their means makes for a real poser, particularly in a society predicated on a hard line between the have and have-nots. Friedenburg says "A serious polarization seems to be happening in America, for which I am glad, but then I am not a liberal". That is a beautiful mouthful. The schools are ducking this increasing polarity by defining the difference between rich and poor not in terms of wealth, power, and influence, but in terms of...are you ready?...cultural deprivation. Then this deprivation is defused by turning it into a wet paper bag, bursting with cultural goodies like short hair, shirt and tie and other apple pie artifacts, which only serve to confirm the original gap the have-not was trying to overcome. (My little sister just walked in the door singing freedom, freedom, read the first paragraph of this article, and promptly asked how you would classify Marshal McLuhan). An even more important implication, with a touch of the old Calvinist reverse, is that the only reason this culture must be acquired is to get a job, so it isn't really very important after all. Thus, if you don't have it, you aren't really inferior. Friedenburg turns this right side up and says, "a more valid human message would have been that you have the right to dress in a way you think becomes you, but no matter how you dress, it may indeed be true you are inferior to other people". Even at that you are still dealing in terms of cultural deprivation, the term predicated by the institution to mask the real conflicts of interest. But if you are indeed inferior, the school as an institution may claim a considerable part of the credit. Maybe you chose to be a victim, a living, breathing example of wet paper bag culture.

While undergoing this institutional process, youth still manages to get its head above water occasionally, hungering after experience or ideas that are individually and personally important. He or she may attempt this through the school, but its a closed shop, based on an original personal expression. Its unfortunate one of the principal influences in the lives of so many young people has so little awakening spirit, and dampens rather than fosters the fun and force of new experience.

Steve Kimber

A Thousand Words A Week

The dark grey limousines of the illustrious luminaries who invariably attend such functions of state, stood somberly against the curb in the damp stillness of the mid-afternoon, patiently awaiting the return of their masters. Two chauffeurs, uncomfortable in their grey suits, smoked and played cards idly in one of the back seats. On the other side of the Legislative Building, a military ensemble, freed from the task of providing accompaniment for His Lordship's entrance stood talking, idly wondering aloud about the proceedings going on within.

They needn't have bothered - inside in the Legislative Chambers, the scene was no different from those which have preceded it. There were some new faces, but the play was the same. The ladies, in last year's fashions were still in the gallery, looking as if they had forgotten to go home after the opening of the Legislature the year before. The MLA's sat uncomfortably in their seats, wishing that it would all be over so they could get down to the serious business of another drink. The new Lieutenant-Governor Victor deB. Oland, surrounded by a flock of medalled hirelings, was reading a Speech from the Throne that sounded as if it should have been ready twenty years ago. One member, obviously drunk, came in on cue with his "Hear! Hear!" every minute or so.

The Lieutenant-Governor in his plummaged headpiece read slowly but distinctly: "In view of the increasing scope and complexity of legislative and government activities since the last report of the last Select Committee on the appointment of an Ombudsman, you will be asked to appoint another Select Committee to inquire as to whether or not the appointment of an Ombudsman is now required or

desirable. "You will be asked to consider legislation respecting equal pay for equal work."

The list went on. Human Rights has a high priority (only eighteen months was required to name a Co-ordinator for the Human Rights Act, and that only came after repeated proddings by the Black Panthers), a Committee will be set up to investigate the issuance of warrants for non-payment of taxes (a man recently spent five-and-a-half months in jail under that law), and blah, blah, blah. Last year's fashions and last decades laws.

A government, to be effective cannot merely confront the existing realities when circumstances force it to do so - it must begin to tackle the problems of today before they become the crises of tomorrow. This, the present Government has failed to do. It has become senile, as is evidenced by the recent throne speech, a document that was only striking for its uniform dullness. There was nothing in that speech to excite the imagination, no conception of a better tomorrow; merely sixty-nine paragraphs of incoherent sameness.

The Government has had the recommendations of the University Grants Committee on financial aid to post-secondary education for over three months and has failed to act. For University administrators planning their own priorities for next term the situation is intolerable. Will it take a student strike to convince the government that education must have a higher priority. These are only some of the recent instances of a government that has lost its drive and initiative, a government that is dead.

One thing in the witty and urbane document read by the Lieutenant-Governor did however seem particularly apt. "This session," he told the yawning Assemblymen, "is of particular historic signifi-

cance as it was 150 years ago on February 11, 1819, that the House of Assembly first met in this building and it has continuously met here since that time." One could only wish that he had added in his ringing and solemn voice: "We are gathered here today to re-enact that session and the following is the Speech From The Throne of that memorable occasion." The post-hoc Government we enjoy today deserves nothing better.

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