

schooling on democracy, it's wise to think not only about the overall academic decision-making process but also about day-to-day classroom experience as well. That's at the very heart of the problem. It's in the classroom where you learn that happiness is submission and where you are used to authoritarianism and coercion. It's in the classroom where you learn how to follow orders mindlessly and how to surrender your sovereignty to an institution.

Incidentally, in discussing this question, I've often heard the objection that teachers legitimately possess authority by virtue of their knowledge and that, therefore, democracy is out of place in the classroom. This argument is a favorite with teachers, so it deserves some attention.

It's true that many teachers possess authority in one particular sense of the word but that does not entitle them to authority in every sense of the word. A teacher's authority rests in his special knowledge or ability, not in his power over students. I may be, say, an authority on ancient history but what has that to do with authority in the sense of a right to enforce obedience, to reward and punish? And the fact that I work for the state of California doesn't amplify my academic authority. If I'm sound in my analysis of Athenian society, the state of California adds nothing. If I'm all wrong, the state of California doesn't make me less wrong.

Democracy in school doesn't mean that a class votes on whether two and two make four, even though that seems to be the fear of some teachers. Suppose, for example, my entire history class insists that Rome fell because of its sexual laxity. Suppose we argue. I give my reasons and they give theirs. Then, in desperation, I try to impress them by detailing my academic background but they still insist that they're right. In this (unlikely) situation what relevance would grading have? What would it add to my true authority if I were able to pass, fail, expel and what have you? My value to a class is that I can give of some kind of assistance to them. What they make of it is up to them. I'm a teacher not a cop. Democracy in school doesn't mean that we vote on what's true; it means that education isn't anything which is done to somebody.

#### "IF IT WEREN'T COMPULSORY..."

If we want our children locked up all day until they're sixteen, let's at least be honest about it and stop trying to pass imprisonment off as education.

Say, for example, that a mother and father would like their eight-year-old boy out of the house all day and off the streets. Then I guess they will want there to be some place for him to go. Call it a youth center, a postgraduate nursery or a daytime internment camp. But why does it have to be a school? It should have plenty of room and lots of variety: places to be alone if you want, places to play games if you want, places to build things, and places to learn how to read and do sums — if you want.

Learning isn't a duty that we must be flogged into performing; it's our birthright, our very human speciality and joy. Places to learn are everywhere. So are reasons to learn. All we need, occasionally, is a little help from our friends.

We don't need compulsory schooling to force us to read. There are good reasons to read and things all around us that want to be read. And if someone should choose to pass his life illiterate, there are other communications media accessible to him. He'll probably make out fine. He may even be able to teach the rest of us some things that print hides.

It would be well if we stopped lying to ourselves about what compulsory schooling does for our children. It temporarily imprisons them; it standardizes them; it intimidates them. If that's what we want, we should admit it.

There's not much point in going on about this. If you've somehow missed reading A. S. Neill's *Summerhill*, you ought to go out and get it.

Incidentally, with compulsory schooling eliminated, there is no reason

to assume that most parents will send their children to public internment centers during the day, or that learning itself will be as dependent upon public institutions as it now is. With compulsory education and all the related red tape out of the way, small groups of parents should be able to make their own arrangements to care for their children and even to satisfy the children's desire to learn. Some areas of learning — nuclear physics, for example — require heavy financial support. But many other areas do not; they provide opportunities for those who want to learn or teach to bypass official institutions. Furthermore, advances in computers, in information retrieval and in communication should soon make it much easier and cheaper than it is now to learn outside of public schools. Technological developments should, before long, give a home resources that are presently available only to a large and well-funded school. Sooner or later, if a child (or adult) wants to learn more about, say, snakes or jet engines, he should be able to tune in, at home, to books, films, learning computers and so on, which he can use as much or as little as he wants. Naturally, if the child chooses not to use the computers and books, that should be his unrestricted right. What I'm getting at is that parents should, before long, be able to develop a formidable alternative to our system of compulsory public elementary schools. As for older children — adolescents — the whole matter is less a parental responsibility and more their own.

#### "IF SCHOOLS WERE AUTONOMOUS AND WERE RUN BY THE PEOPLE IN THEM..."

Learning is not something that is done to you.

Suppose we agree that there must be something better than our schools, something better suited to our human potential, our political ideals and our accelerating technology. What then? It is

## "They petrify society..."

exactly at this point that there is a temptation to make what I believe is the basic educational blunder: having tried and convicted the present educational system, one then works out in detail his own educational utopia — setting up a blueprint that covers matters such as curriculum, textbooks, administration policy, student-teacher ratio, classroom construction, and so on.

From my point of view, however, a good school can't be described very clearly in advance because one essential characteristic of a good school is the freedom to establish its own direction. In fact, there may not even be such a thing as a good school within our present conception of what "school" means.

To say that learning is not something that is done to you has meaning on more than one level. With respect to the school as a whole, it means autonomy. There should be no dictatorial governing board or other body above the school making its decisions for it. If we are going to continue our policy of public education, this means that the people and their elected representatives will have to accept a new and radical policy: that they must pay for schools without controlling them. What happens, therefore, on a state university campus or on a junior high school campus would be decided neither by the legislature nor by the governor nor by any board of regents or board of education nor by any chancellor or superintendent of schools but only by the persons participating in the school itself. It is true that there would be a kind of power implicit in the fact that the state or community could refuse to pay for the school or could reduce its funds. But that would be the limit. To the extent that a state or city wanted to have a school, it would have to pay for it and leave it alone. Hopefully, the idea of an externally

controlled school will in time become a contradiction in terms.

To prevent education from being victimization, it will not be enough to have autonomy and democracy for the school as a whole. One would also want individual groups within a school to be free to develop their own learning structures without being pushed around and standardized by some central administration. However, I want to avoid falling — into the trap I described earlier; I want to avoid trying to blueprint an educational utopia in advance. Self-government in practice cannot help but fall short of an ideal and therefore admits of endless approaches. If schools can serve as workshops in self-government, it will be both likely and valuable that they be diverse in this respect.

If schools are free, some of them may choose to renounce a part of their freedom. There may be students who prefer to be dictated to. For all I know there may always be students who want to be graded daily and threatened with probation, dismissal and so on, just as there may always be persons who want to be flogged and will no doubt always find other persons willing to do it. It is certainly not my wish to prevent them.

The freedom I talk about, incidentally, is not merely a matter of "academic" freedom. Schools are not just learning places but communities as well. Many schools are communities in the full sense of the word: people don't just go to them; they live in them. And, in the future, the distinction between "school" and "community" is likely to be much vaguer than it is now.

#### "THE POWER TO SAY 'NO'"

The people who control colleges are fond of pointing out to students that higher education is a privilege. The implication is that if they don't behave, the privilege will be withdrawn. Similarly, in high school the ultimate threat is expulsion. School is supposed to be some kind of favor that society grants you. The condition for continuing to receive this

favor is that you accept it on society's terms.

Sweat shop owners used to tell their workers more or less the same thing. It's astonishing that workers swallowed that line for so long. And it's equally astonishing that most students continue to see schooling as a privilege rather than as a transaction in which they happen to be getting a rotten deal.

When you go to school, you do society an enormous favor; you give it the opportunity to mold you in its image, stunting and deadening you in the process.

What you get in return is access to an income bracket and the material comforts that go with it. But think what you've given up. Other animals have much of their nature born in them. But you were born with the freedom to learn, to change, to transcend yourself to create your life — that's your human birthright. In school you sell it very cheap.

I have already tried to show that this rotten bargain isn't even good for society, that it forestalls necessary social change. Unfortunately, the dying part of society, which controls schooling, is also the part least likely to understand the need for profound change. It is the students — the not entirely socialized — who most feel the need for change and who, in trying to transform the society in which they live, become the victims of its self-protective rage.

The power that students have is simply the power not to be students, to refuse a bad bargain, as workers have frequently done to say "no." If students have power, it is because they have something society needs very badly. Student power is made possible by the dying society's need to remain alive — to preserve itself through its children. Think how our institutions feed on the un-



formed future. Think even how individuals — those aging businessmen on a college board of trustees — clutch at immortality by putting their trip on the young. Society needs students to retain its identity; they are the only future it has. For this reason, students can demand freedom from exploitation and can get that freedom. They can insist that the continuity they provide society be one that is achieved through rebirth rather than through petrification.

In the long run, if students and teachers can outgrow their feudal relationship, they do indeed have a common cause: the freeing of schools from domination by outside forces. Perhaps the best thing students can do with respect to faculty is, first of all, to emphasize that common cause and to fully support faculty moves for greater self-determination and, second, to work ceaselessly to educate teachers, to show them what's lacking in school as it is and to show them what education could be.

#### Student and Society

There are a multitude of approaches that students can take toward changing schools. But the one that offers the most hope is the strike or boycott. It is more than a gesture, more than a pressure tactic. It cuts right to the heart of the problem. It refuses a bad bargain; it puts the future on strike. Requests can be denied or put off. Demonstrations can be broken up and the protesters put in jail. But a strike is not really vulnerable to force. When Governor Reagan of California promised to keep San Francisco State College open at the point of a bayonet if need be, he failed to understand both the limitations of the bayonet and the power of the student revolution.

High school students are in a more difficult position but this has not stopped them from beginning to use boycotts as well as other forms of noncooperation in order to change their schools. A few high school troublemakers can be expelled or disciplined in other ways. But what does it mean to expel most of the students in a school — especially when you've already compelled them to be there? Also, because these students are so regimented and because they are actually compelled to attend, a high school strike, though very difficult to bring about, is an even more dramatic and powerful action than is a college strike.

I have not yet said anything about the possibility of faculty-student cooperation in changing the nature of school. Such cooperation is difficult; most faculty members are still very much caught up in their roles and, even though they have their own reasons to want to change things, are reluctant to make common cause with students. Faculty, furthermore, are very hesitant to engage in the kind of forceful actions that might endanger their jobs or even their chances for promotion, tenure and so on. Still, there are enough instances of student-faculty cooperation to keep this an important possibility even at present. In order, though, for such cooperation to advance rather than impede student progress, it is essential that students don't wait around for faculty support and that they don't allow professorial timidity to rub off on them.