

Remember Jerry Farber, the "The Student As Nigger" chap? Well, he's certainly elicited a lot of excitement amongst folks in Alberta; we've had many comments and one or two rejoinders to the article - as well, it's been banned from a Lethbridge high school, where the school principal has branded Farber a "psychopath" and said his treatment of the subject of

student repression is "perverted."

That seems reasonably silly to the folks here at Gateway, so we've decided to send you out another tidbit that Farber wrote back in '68. It's more serious and lengthy than "The Student As Nigger" and perhaps not quite so perverse. Send a copy to the principal of Lethbridge Collegiate Institute and ask him what he thinks of this try.

Student Manifesto

by Jerry Farber

School is where you let the dying society put its trip on you. Our schools may seem useful: to make children into doctors, sociologists, engineers — to discover things. But they're poisonous as well. They exploit and enslave students; they petrify society; they make democracy unlikely. And it's not **what** you're taught that does the harm but **how** you're taught. Our schools teach you by pushing you around, by stealing your will and your sense of power, by making timid square apathetic slaves out of you — authority addicts.

Schooling doesn't have to be this destructive. If it weren't compulsory, if schools were autonomous and were run by the people in them, then we could learn without being subdued and stupefied in the process. And, perhaps, we could regain control of our own society.

Students can change things if they want to because they have the power to say "no." When you go to school, you're doing society a favor. And when you say "no," you withhold much more than your attendance. You deny continuity to the dying society; you put the future on strike. Students can have the kind of school they want — or even something else entirely if they want — because there isn't going to be any school at all without them.

"SCHOOL IS WHERE YOU LET THE DYING SOCIETY PUT ITS TRIP ON YOU."

School is a genetic mechanism for society, a kind of DNA process that continually recreates styles, skills, values, hangups — and so keeps the whole thing going. The dying part of society — the society that has been — molds the emerging part more or less in its own image, and fashions the society that will be.

Schooling also makes change possible — evolution, if you like. But here we run into a problem. Although our schools foster enormous technological change, they help to keep social change within very narrow limits. Thanks to them, the technological capacity of society evolves at an explosive rate. But there is no comparable, adaptive evolution in the overall social framework, nor in the consciousness of the individuals who make up society. It isn't just that schools fail to create the necessary social change. They actually restrain it. They prevent it. (**How** they prevent it is the subject of the notes that follow.)

When I say that schools serve the society-that-has-been, the dying society, I mean just that. It isn't "society" itself that runs our schools. Children and adolescents are a huge segment of society but they don't run schools. Even

young adults don't run them. Nor as a general rule do workers. Nor do black people. Nor do the poor in general. By and large our schools are in the hands of the most entrenched and rigidly conservative elements in society. In the secondary and elementary schools, students, of course, have venerable clergymen and society matrons. Teachers have little power.

Administrators possess somewhat more, but the real control comes from those solid Chamber-of-Commerce types on the school board. They uphold the sovereignty of the past; they are the very avatars of institutional inertia. As for the colleges and universities, California, where I teach, is typical. Higher education is controlled primarily by the business elite, aided by a sprinkling of aging politicians. In the rare cases when these trustees and governing boards relax their right control, they are backstopped by our elected officials, whose noses are always aquiver for subversion and scandal and who are epitomized in the querulous Mrs. Grundy, our current governor.

While schools stifle social change, technological change is, to repeat, another matter. The society-that-has-been, in its slavering pursuit of higher profits and better weapons, demands technological progress at a fantastic, accelerating rate. Universities have consequently become a giant industry in their own right. A few tatters of commencement-day rhetoric still cling to them but it becomes more obvious every day that the modern university is not much more than a Research, Development and Training center set up to service government and industry. And so we have a technological explosion within the rigid confines of our unchanging social institutions and values. Schools today give us fantastic power at the same time as they sap our ability to handle it. Good luck, everybody.

"IT'S NOT WHAT YOU'RE TAUGHT THAT DOES THE HARM BUT HOW YOU'RE TAUGHT."

In fact, for most of your school life, it doesn't make that much difference what subject you're taught. The real lesson is the method. The medium in school truly is the message. And the medium is, above all, coercive. You're forced to attend. The subjects are required. You **have** to do homework. You **must** observe the rules. And throughout, you're bullied into docility and submissiveness. Even modern liberal refinements don't really help. So you're called an underachiever instead of a dummy. So they send you to a counselor instead of beating you. It's still not your choice to be there. They may pad the handcuffs — but the handcuffs stay on.

Which particular subject they happen to teach is far less important than the fact that it is required. We don't learn that much subject matter in school anyway in proportion to the huge part of our lives that we spend there. But what we do learn very well, thanks to the method, is to accept choices that have been made for us. Which rule they make you follow is less important than the fact that there are rules. I hear about English teachers who won't allow their students to begin a sentence with "and." Or about high schools where the male students are not permitted to wear a T-shirt unless it has a pocket. I no longer dismiss such rules as merely pointless. The very point to such rules is their pointlessness.

The true and enduring content of education is its method. The method that currently prevails in schools is standardized, impersonal and coercive. What it teaches best is — itself. If, on the other hand, the method were individual, human and free, it would teach that. It would not, however, mesh smoothly into the machine we seem to have chosen as a model for our society.

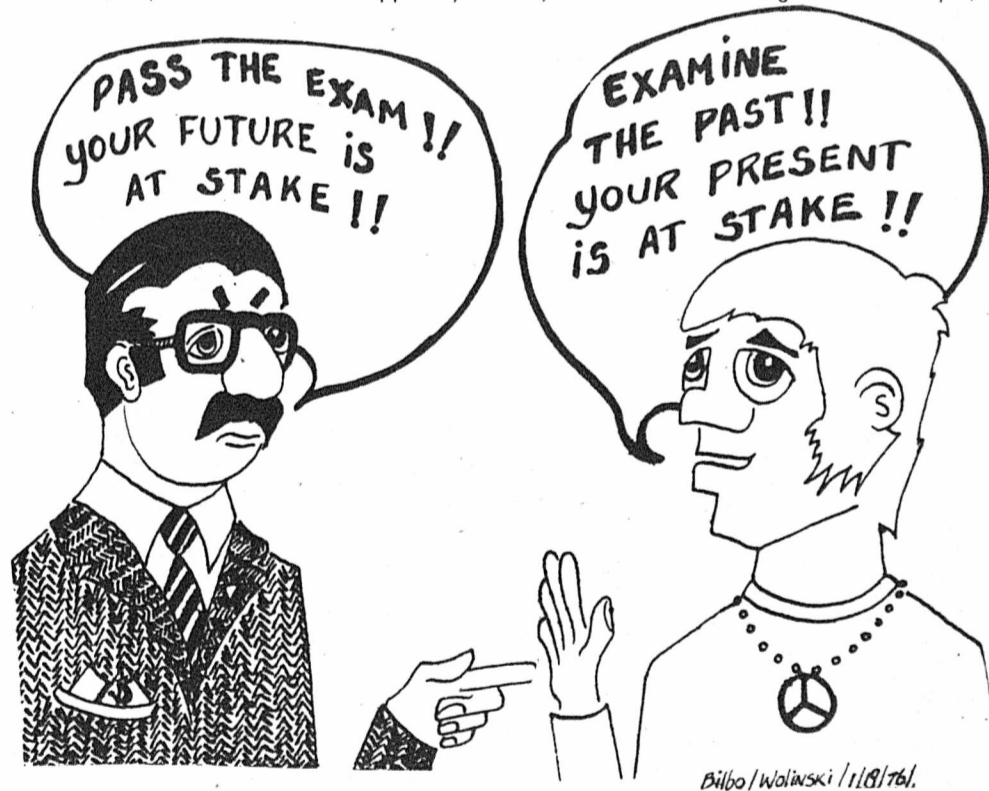
It's how you're taught that does the harm. You may only study geometry for a semester — or French for two years. But **doing what you're told**, whether or not it makes sense, is a lesson you get every blessed school day for twelve years or more. You know how malleable we humans are. And you know what good learners we are — how little time it takes us to learn to drive a car or a plane or to play passable guitar. So imagine what the effect must be upon our apt and impressionable minds of a twelve-year course in servility. Think about it. Twelve years of tardy bells and hall passes; of graded homework, graded tests, graded conduct; of report cards, GPA's, honors lists, citizenship ratings; of dress codes, straight lines, and silence. **What is it that they're teaching you?** Twelve years pitted against your classmates in a daily Roman circus. The game is **Doing What You're Told**. The winners get gold stars, affection, envy; they get A's and E's, honors, awards and college scholarships. The losers get humiliation and degradation. The fear of losing the game is a great fear: it's the fear of swats, of the principal's office; and above all the fear of failing. What if you fail and have to watch your friends move past you to glory? And, of course, the worst could happen: you

But can you feel any of this? Can you understand what has been done to your mind? We get so used to the pressure that we scarcely are conscious of it without making some effort.

Why does the medium of education affect us so deeply while its purported content — the subject matter — so often slips our minds? This is partly because the content varies from year to year while the form remains more or less the same; but also because the form — a structure of rules, punishments, rewards — affects us directly in a real way, while the subject matter may have no such immediate grasp on our lives. After all, don't we tend to learn best what matters most? Under a coercive system it isn't really the subject that matters; what matters is pleasing the authorities. These two are far from the same thing.

Remember French class in high school (or college, for that matter)? The teacher calls on you, one at a time, to see if you've prepared the questions at the end of Lecon 19. "Marshall," she asks, "qu'est-ce que Robert allait faire le mardi?" Marshall doesn't get to respond that he doesn't give a shit — not even in French. Fat chance. While he's in school, he's got to be servile to stay out of trouble. And the law requires him to be in school. He's got to do the questions in Lecon 19 because the teacher said to. He's got to do what the teacher said in order to pass the course. He's got to pass the course to get to college. He's got to get to college because it's been explained to him that he'll be a clod all his life if he doesn't; at assembly they've put up charts showing how many hundreds of thousands of dollars more he'll make in his lifetime if he goes to college. And, of course, there's an immediate reason as well for Marshall to have done his homework. If he hasn't, he'll be embarrassed in front of the class.

The educational medium has a very real hold on his life. Unfortunately, the subject probably does not. So we can't console him for all this dull toil by pointing out that he is at least learning French. Because, of course, he isn't. He'll take two years of French in high school. And when he gets to college, it will be like they never happened. Right? In fact, some acquaintances from Montreal recently told me that English-speaking students there are required to take French every year from the second grade on. And yet, I



could be expelled. Not that very many kids gets swats or fail or are expelled. But it doesn't take many for the message to get across. These few heavy losers are like severed heads displayed at the city gates to keep the populace in line.

And, to make it worse, all of this pressure is augmented by those countless parents who are ego freaks and competition heads and who forcibly pass their addiction on to their kids. The pressure at school isn't enough; they **pay** the kids for A's and punish them for D's. and F's.

was told, after ten years of the language, they still haven't learned it.

Or what about Freshman English? What actually gets taught? The purported subject matter is usually writing. But consider, up front, who teaches the course. It's usually some well-meaning instructor or TA whose own writing achievements have reached their zenith in a series of idle and heroically dull papers, written in pretentious faggot-

continued on next page