

THE FALSE IDEOLOGY OF SCHOOLING

by IVAN ILLICH

During the past decade, we have become used to seeing the world divided into two parts: the developed and the underdeveloped. People in the development business may prefer to speak of the developed nations and the less developed or developing nations. This terminology suggests that development is both good and inevitable. Others, especially protagonists of revolutionary change, speak of the Third World and wait for the day when the wretched of the earth will rise in armed revolt against the imperialist powers and shift control over existing institutions from north to south, from white to black, from metropolis to colony.

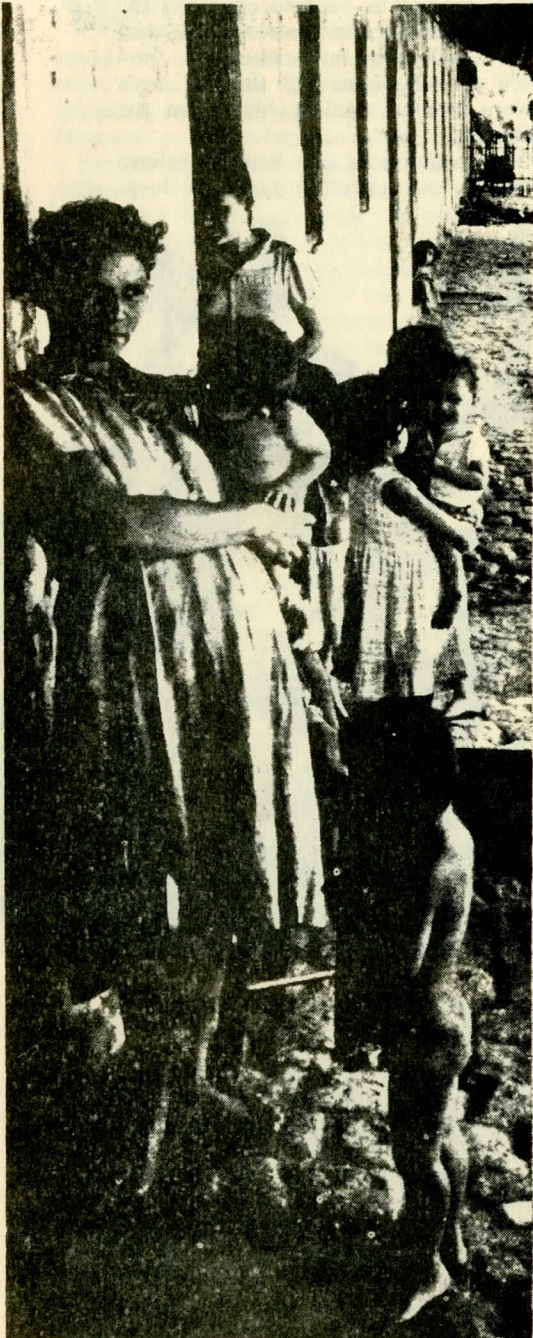
A vulgar example of the first assumption is the Rockefeller report on the Americas. Its doctrine has been aptly summed up by President Nixon: "This I pledge: The nation that went to the moon in peace for all mankind is ready to share its technology in peace with its nearest neighbors." The Governor, in turn, proposes that keeping the pledge might require a lot of additional weaponry in South America.

The Pearson report on partnership in development is a much more sophisticated example of the development mentality. It outlines policies that will permit a few more countries to join the charmed circle of the consumer nations, but that will actually increase the poverty of the poor in these same countries, because the strategies proposed will sell them ever more thoroughly on goods and services ever more expensive and out of their reach. The policy goals of most revolutionary movements and governments I know—and I do not know Mao's China—reflect another type of cynicism. Their leaders make futile promises that—once they are in power for a sufficient

length of time—more of everything the masses have learned to know and to crave as privileges of the rich will be produced and distributed. Both the purveyors of development and the preachers of revolution advocate more of the same. They define more education as more schooling, better health as more doctors, higher mobility as more high-speed vehicles. The goals of development are always and everywhere stated in terms of consumer-value packages standardized around the North Atlantic—and therefore always and everywhere imply more privileges for a few. Political reorganization cannot change this fact; it can only rationalize it. Different ideologies create different minorities of privileged consumers, but heart surgery or a university education is always priced out of range for all but a few, be they the rich, the orthodox, or the most fascinating subjects for experiments by surgeons or pedagogues.

Underdevelopment is the result of a state of mind common to both socialist and capitalist countries. Present development goals are neither desirable nor reasonable. Unfortunately, anti-imperialism is no antidote. Although exploitation of poor countries is an undeniable reality, current nationalism is merely the affirmation of the right of colonial elites to repeat history and follow the road traveled by the rich toward the universal consumption of internationally marketed packages, a road that can ultimately lead only to universal pollution and universal frustration.

The central issue of our time remains the fact that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. This hard fact is often obscured by another apparently contradictory fact. In the rich countries, the poor have access to a quantity and quality of commodities beyond the dreams of Louis XIV, while many of the so-called developing countries enjoy much higher economic growth rates than those of industrialized countries at a similar stage of their own histories. From icebox to toilet and from antibiotic to television, conveniences Washington could not have imagined at Mount Vernon are found necessary in Harlem, just as Bolivar could not have foreseen the



—Nancy Flowers (Bethel)

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social polarization now inevitable in Caracas. But rising levels neither of minimum consumption in the rich countries nor of urban consumption in the poor countries can close the gap between rich and poor nations or between the rich and poor of any one nation. Modern poverty is a by-product of a world market catering to the ideologies of an industrial middle class. Modern poverty is built into an international community where demand is engineered through publicity to stimulate the production of standard commodities. In such a market, expectations are standardized and must always outrace marketable resources.

In the United States, for all its gargantuan prosperity, real poverty levels rise faster than the median income. In the capital-starved countries, median incomes move rapidly away from rising averages. Most goods now produced for rich and poor alike in the United States are beyond the reach of all but a few in other areas. In both rich and poor nations, consumption is polarized while expectation is equalized.

During the decade now beginning, we must learn a new language, a language that speaks not of development and underdevelopment but of true and false ideas about man, his needs, and his potential. Development programs all over the world progressively lead to violence, in the form either of repression or of rebellion. This is due to neither the evil intentions of capitalists nor the ideological rigidity of communists, but to the radical inability of men to tolerate the by-products of industrial and welfare institutions developed in the early industrial age. In the late Sixties, attention was suddenly drawn to the inability of man to survive his industry. During the late Sixties, it became evident that less than 10 per cent of the human race consumes more than 50 per cent of the world's resources and produces 90 per cent of the physical pollution that threatens to extinguish the biosphere. But this is only one aspect of the paradox of present development. During the early Seventies, it will become equally clear that welfare institutions have an analogous regressive effect. The international institutionalization of social service, medicine, and education generally identified with development has equally overwhelming, destructive by-products.

We need an alternative program, an alternative both to development and to merely political revolution. Let me call this alternative program either institutional or cultural revolution, because its aim is the transformation of both public and personal reality. The

political revolutionary wants to improve existing institutions—their productivity and the quality and distribution of their products. His vision of what is desirable and possible is based on consumption habits developed during the past hundred years. The cultural revolutionary believes that these habits have radically distorted our view of what human beings can have and want. He questions the reality others take for granted, a reality that is, in his view, the artificial by-product of contemporary institutions, created and reinforced by them in pursuit of their short-term ends. The political revolutionary concentrates on schooling and tooling for the environment that the rich countries, socialist or capitalist, have engineered. The cultural revolutionary risks the future on the educability of man.

The cultural revolutionary must be distinguished from not only the political magician but also both the neo-Luddite and the promoter of intermediary technology. The former behaves as if either the noble savage could be restored to the throne or the Third World transformed into a reservation for him. He opposes the internal combustion engine rather than oppose its packaging into some product designed for exclusive use by the man who owns it. Thus, the Luddite blames the producer; the institutional revolutionary tries to reshape the design and distribution of the product. The Luddite blames the machine; the cultural revolutionary heightens awareness that it produces needless demands. The cultural revolutionary must also be distinguished from the promoter of intermediary technology who is often merely a superior tactician paving the road to totally manipulated consumption.

Let me illustrate what I mean by a cultural revolution within one major international institution, by taking as an example the institution that currently produces education. I mean, of course, obligatory schooling: full-time attendance of age-specific groups in a graded curriculum.

Latin America has decided to school itself into development. This decision results in the production of homemade inferiority. With every school that is built, another seed of institutional corruption is planted, and this is in the name of growth.

Schools affect individuals and characterize nations. Individuals merely get a bad deal; nations are irreversibly degraded when they build schools to help their citizens play at international competition. For the individual, school is always a gamble. The chances may be very slim, but everyone shoots for the same jackpot. Of course, as any professional gambler knows, it is the

rich who win in the end, and the poor who get hooked. And if the poor man manages to stay in the game for a while, he will feel the pain even more sharply when he does lose, as he almost inevitably must. Primary school dropouts in a Latin American city find it increasingly difficult to get an industrial job.

But no matter how high the odds, everyone plays the game, for there is, after all, only one game in town. A scholarship may be a long shot, but it is a chance to become equal to the world's best-trained bureaucrats. And the student who fails can console himself with the knowledge that the cards were stacked against him from the outset.

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gets only what he deserves. The belief in the ability of schools to label people correctly is already so strong that people accept their vocational and marital fates with a gambler's resignation. In cities, this faith in school-slotting is on the way to sprouting a more creditable meritocracy—a state of mind in which each citizen believes that he deserves the place assigned to him by school. A perfect meritocracy, in which there would be no excuses, is not yet upon us, and I believe it can be avoided. It must be avoided, since a perfect meritocracy would not only be hellish, it would be hell.

Educators appeal to the gambling

instinct of the entire population when they raise money for schools. They advertise the jackpot without mentioning the odds. And those odds are high indeed for someone who is born brown, poor, or on the pampa. In Latin America, no country is prouder of its legally obligatory admission-free school system than Argentina. Yet, only one Argentinian of 5,000 born into the lower half of the population gets as far as the university.

What is only a wheel of fortune for an individual is a spinning wheel of irreversible underdevelopment for a nation. The high cost of schooling turns education into a scarce resource, as poor countries accept that a certain number of years in school makes an educated man. More money gets spent on fewer people. In poor countries, the school pyramid of the rich countries takes on the shape of an obelisk, or a rocket. School inevitably gives individuals who attend it and then drop out, as well as those who don't make it at all, a rationale for their own inferiority. But for poor nations, obligatory schooling is a monument to self-inflicted inferiority. To buy the schooling hoax is to purchase a ticket for the back seat in a bus headed nowhere.

Schooling encrusts the poorest nations at the bottom of the educational bucket. The school systems of Latin America are fossilized records of a dream begun a century ago. The school pyramid is abuilding from top to bottom throughout Latin America. All countries there spend more than 20 per cent of their national budgets and nearly 5 per cent of their Gross National Products on its construction. Teachers constitute the largest profession, and their children are frequently the largest group of students in the upper grades. Fundamental education either is redefined as the foundation

for schooling and therefore placed beyond the reach of the unschooled and the early dropout or it is defined as a remedy for the unschooled, which will only frustrate him into accepting inferiority. Even the poorest countries continue to spend disproportionate sums on graduate schools—gardens that ornament the penthouses of skyscrapers built in a slum.

Bolivia is well on the way to suicide by an overdose of schooling. This impoverished, landlocked country creates papier-mâché bridges to prosperity by spending more than a third of its entire budget on public education and half as much again on private schools. A full half of this educational mispending is consumed by 1 per cent of the school-age population. In Bolivia, the university student's share of public funds is a thousand times greater than that of his fellow citizen of median income. Most Bolivian people live outside the city, yet only 2 per cent of the rural population makes it to the fifth grade. This discrimination was legally sanctioned in 1967 by declaring grade school obligatory for all—a law that made most people criminal by fiat, and the rest immoral exploiters by decree. In 1970, the university entrance examinations were abolished with a flourish of egalitarian rhetoric. At first glance, it does seem a libertarian advance to legislate that all high school graduates have a right to enter the university—until you realize that fewer than 2 per cent of Bolivians finish high school.

Bolivia may be an extreme example of schooling in Latin America. But on an international scale, Bolivia is typical. Few African or Asian countries have attained the progress now taken for granted there.

Cuba is perhaps an example of the other extreme. Fidel Castro has tried to create a major cultural revolution. He has reshaped the academic pyr-

amid. Yet, the Cuban pyramid is still a pyramid. There is no doubt that the redistribution of privilege, the redefinition of social goals, and the popular participation in the achievement of these goals have reached spectacular heights in Cuba since the Revolution. For the moment, however, Cuba is only showing that under exceptional political conditions the present school system can be expanded exceptionally. But there are built-in limits to the elasticity of present institutions, and Cuba is at the point of reaching them. The Cuban Revolution will work—within these limits. Which only means that Dr. Castro will have masterminded a faster road to a bourgeois meritocracy than those previously taken by capitalists or Bolsheviks. Sometimes, when he is not promising schools for all, Castro hints at a policy of de-schooling for all, and the Isle of Pines seems to be a laboratory for redistribution of educational functions to other social institutions. But unless Cuban educators admit that work-education effective in a rural economy can be even more effective in an urban one, Cuba's institutional revolution will not begin. No cultural revolution can be built on the denial of reality.

As long as communist Cuba continues to promise obligatory high school completion by the end of this decade, it is, in this regard, institutionally no more promising than fascist Brazil, which has made a similar promise. In both Brazil and Cuba, enough girls have already been born to double the number of potential mothers in the 1980s. Per capita resources available for education can hardly be expected to double in either country, and even if they could, no progress would have been made at all. In Brazil and in Cuba, waiting for Godot is equally futile. Without a radical change in their institutional goals, both "revolutions" must make fools of themselves. Unfortunately, both seem headed for manifest foolishness, albeit by different routes. The Cubans allow work, party, and community involvement to nibble away at the school year, and call this involvement radical education, while the Brazilians let U.S. experts peddle teaching devices that only raise the per capita cost of classroom attendance.

The production of inferiority through schooling is more evident in poor countries and perhaps more painful in rich countries. In the United States, the 10 per cent with the highest incomes can provide most of the education for their children through private institutions. Yet, they also succeed in obtaining ten times more of the public resources devoted to education than the poorest 10 per cent of the population. (Continued on page 68)



—Nancy Flowers (Bethel)

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tion. In Soviet Russia, a more puritanical belief in meritocracy makes the concentration of schooling privileges on the children of urban professionals even more painful.

In the shadow of each national school pyramid, an international caste system is wedded to an international class structure. Countries are ranged like castes, each of whose educational dignity is determined by the average years of schooling of its citizens. Individual citizens of all countries achieve a symbolic mobility through a class system that makes each man accept the place he believes he merits.

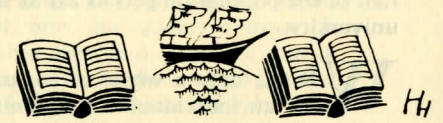
The political revolutionary strengthens the demand for schooling by futilely promising that under his administration more learning and increased earning will become available to all through more schooling. He contributes to the modernization of a world class structure and a modernization of poverty. It remains the task of the cultural revolutionary to overcome the delusions on which the support of school is based and to outline policies for the radical de-schooling of society.

The basic reason for all this is that schooling comes in quantities. Less than so much is no good, and the minimum quantity carries a minimum price. It is obvious that with schools of equal quality a poor child can never catch up with a rich one, nor a poor country with a rich country. It is equally obvious that poor children and poor countries never have equal schools, but always poorer ones; thus, they fall ever further behind, as long as they depend on schools for their education.

Another illusion is that most learning is a result of teaching. Teaching may contribute to certain kinds of learning under certain circumstances. The strongly motivated student faced with the task of learning a new code may benefit greatly from the discipline we now associate mostly with the old-fashioned schoolmaster. But most people acquire most of their insight, knowledge, and skill outside of school—and in school only insofar as school in a few rich countries becomes their place of confinement during an increasing part of their lives. The radical de-schooling of society begins, therefore, with the unmasking by cultural revolutionaries of the myth of schooling. It continues with the struggle to liberate other men's minds from the false ideology of schooling—an ideology that makes domestication by schooling inevitable. In its final and positive stage, it is the struggle for the right to educational freedom, economy, and efficiency.

A cultural revolutionary must fight for legal protection from the imposition of any obligatory graded curriculum. The first article of a bill of rights for a modern and humanist society should parallel the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. The state shall make no law with respect to an establishment of education. There shall be no graded curriculum, obligatory for all. To make this dis-establishment effective, we need a law forbidding discrimination in hiring, voting, or admission to centers of learning based on previous attendance in some curriculum. This guarantee would not exclude specific tests of competence, but would remove the present absurd discrimination in favor of the person who learns a given skill with the largest expenditure of public funds.

A third legal reform would guarantee the right of each citizen to an equal share of public educational resources, the right to verify his share of these resources, and the right to sue for them if they are denied. A generalized GI bill, or an edu-credit card in the hand of every citizen, would effectively implement this third guarantee.



Abolition of obligatory schooling, abolition of job discrimination in favor of persons who have acquired their learning at a higher cost, plus establishment of edu-credit, would permit the development of a true market for educational services. According to present political ideology, this market could be influenced by various devices: premiums paid to those who acquire certain needed skills, interest-bearing edu-credit to increase the privileges of those who use it later in life, and advantages for industries that incorporate additional formal training into the work routine.

A fourth guarantee to protect the consumer against the monopoly of the educational market would be analogous to antitrust laws.

I have shown in the case of education that a cultural or institutional revolution depends upon the clarification of reality. Development as now conceived is just the contrary: management of the environment and the tooling of man to fit into it. Development is the attempt to create an environment and then educate at great cost to pay for it. Cultural revolution is a reviewing of the reality of man and a redefinition of the world in terms that support this reality.

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