

In Praise of Adult Liberation

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As I head towards retirement, it is fitting that I respond to an essay that echoes a provocative text I first encountered in the early 1970s when I was a young professor, Jerry Farber's *The Student as Nigger*.¹ As Professor Nietzsche said, "What goes around, comes around." I applaud Alexander Sidorkin's spirited defense of a bold thesis. What good are we philosophers if we do not shine a bright light on the possibly shaky foundations of our least contested social ideas and practices?

Sidorkin is aware that Ariès's own hermeneutic of suspicion has aroused suspicion among subsequent historians, but we are not historians here. Nonetheless, if we are to equate children forced to attend school with other paradigmatically subjugated groups such as serfs and slaves, we must be historians to some extent. We must, that is, consider the alternatives children faced before they were herded into schools. Let us recall a couple of salient historical facts: "On 16th March, 1832, Michael Sadler introduced a bill in Parliament that proposed limiting the [working] hours of all persons under the age of eighteen to ten hours a day."² Although the bill failed, in the course of a subsequent inquiry commissioned by Parliament, "Sadler discovered that it was common for very young children to be working for over twelve [hours] a day."³

Surely, not all children in the nineteenth century were working in factories. Indeed not. Many were toiling in the fields and pastures. For example, according to historian of childhood Colin Heywood, "In Belgium 'weeding groups' of thirty to forty children, aged between eight and fourteen, cleaned up beet, oat and flax fields. They regularly awoke at five o'clock in the morning, marched out to the fields for up to an hour, and worked until seven in the evening."⁴ The history of childhood is a huge subject and I will simply let these two factoids stand for the alternatives that faced children prior to the advent of compulsory schooling. This is not to say that children or their parents experienced being ushered into schoolrooms as an unmitigated blessing. There is a dark side to compulsory schooling, both then and now, and even a philosophical issue to which I shall return at the end, but let me point out that attempting to deny the benefits for children deriving from the distinction between child and adult has its dark side as well, motivating a powerful counter-narrative to Sidorkin's, that of Neil Postman, among others.

In the introduction to his own work of provocation, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Postman claims that "the idea of childhood is one of the great inventions of the Renaissance. Perhaps its most humane one."⁵ Postman traces the disappearance of childhood to the influence of electronic media that have usurped the power of the print media to socialize the young. School figures centrally in Postman's narrative. Between the sixteenth and the twentieth century, argues Postman, literate culture gave adults a knowledge monopoly.

A fully literate adult had access to all of the sacred and profane information in books, to the many forms of literature, to all of the recorded secrets of human experience. Children, for the most part, did not. Which is why they were children. And why they were required to go to school.⁶

Postman contends that childhood is, in fact, disappearing and far from celebrating that prospect, he laments it. “To have to stand and wait as the charm, malleability, innocence, and curiosity of children are degraded and then transmogrified into the lesser features of pseudo-adulthood is painful and embarrassing, and, above, all sad.”⁷ Ironically, Postman, like Sidorkin, buys into Ariès’s thesis that childhood is a social construction rather than a biological fact. Another philosopher who, like Postman, decries the erosion of the child-adult distinction, does so, on the grounds that it fails to respect natural differences between children and adults, mistakenly taking the distinction to be a mere social constructions. This author writes,

Children cannot throw off educational authority, as though they were in a position of oppression by an adult majority — though even this absurdity of treating children as an oppressed minority in need of liberation has actually been tried out in modern educational practice. Authority has been discarded by the adults, and this can mean only one thing: that the adults refuse to assume responsibility for the world into which they have brought the children.⁸

Some of you might suppose this text to issue from the pen of a contemporary conservative, a Lynne Cheney or Bill Bennett perhaps. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The text is by that great apostle of freedom, Hannah Arendt. I think she is right. Where, then, does Sidorkin go wrong? Central to Sidorkin’s narrative lies the premise, “There is a reason to believe that immaturity is not only greatly exaggerated, but is specifically trained, created....In general children’s immaturity may be as much a result of social expectations as it is a result of their innate limitations.”

I scarcely know how to challenge such a premise. Should I cite philosophers and psychologists to the contrary? Perhaps the presence in this room of my own granddaughter, age three, would help, but then again, perhaps not. Possibly, Sidorkin is misled by the fact that childhood evolves gradually into adulthood into thinking that the different stages are mere social constructions. Here’s an analogy. When a man with a full head of hair loses it gradually, there is no precise moment when he becomes bald, but that does not mean that baldness is a social construction — though its social meaning is.

Enough of theory; we need praxis. Let us suppose, for a moment, we in adult America accepted Sidorkin’s premise; how might we act on it? Of course, the first thing to do is to abrogate compulsory schooling, which, according to Sikorkin, is no more than a mode of exploiting the young, of extracting their labor without either compensating them or giving them control over their working conditions. But wait a minute. It is not entirely true that the young labor without compensation. Perhaps their hours in the classroom earn no monetary compensation, but we do supply them with food, lodging, medical care, bedtime stories, toys, TV sets and videogames, soccer coaches, piano lessons, vacation trips, summer camps, to say nothing of parks, children’s museums, libraries, and even weekly allowance.

As many of you know, we not only pay, we pay through the nose. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, if you make more than \$70,200 a year it will cost you \$269,520 to raise a child from birth through age 17.⁹ That's \$15,854 a year. Kids go to school about 40 weeks, five days a week for six hours a day, so by my rough calculation this is the equivalent of an hourly wage of \$13.21, about double minimum wage. And for what! Has Sidorkin encountered the same surly, indolent, rude, ungrateful, narcissistic teen-agers patrolling our malls that I have?

Comrades, only a bourgeois apologist could consider these louts an exploited class. We have a more accurate label for them — parasites. Comrades, join me. Let us emancipate our children. We have nothing to lose but our debts.

I have been having fun with Sidorkin's thesis, but I did say that hiding behind an absurd, albeit seductive, narrative is a serious philosophical issue: how to justify compulsory schooling to many adolescents who do feel like condemned prisoners inside high school walls, but who have no legal, much less practical, alternative to schooling. Of course, we can show the potential dropout that securing a high school diploma will give him (or her) a greater future income, but a disaffected sixteen year-old could well say: "That's not sufficient inducement, and there's always the GED if I change my mind." Is paternalism justified here? I do not know, but I have my doubts. And, if it is, why may we not extend it to other arenas. Would not we have every right, for example, not only to require mandatory counseling for anyone below twenty-one contemplating marriage, but to forbid such a marriage? But these questions are academic. What the young need are not different laws or regulations, but paths to respectable adulthood that do not require such long sojourns in school classrooms. In the end, Sidorkin and I reach much the same destination, albeit via different routes.

1. Jerry Farber, *The Student as Nigger* (Chicago: Chicago Area Draft Resisters, 1968).

2. Taken from Teaching History Online, <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Irtime.htm> (page not accessible). For a full scholarly treatment, see Hugh Cunningham, "The Decline of Child Labour: Labour Markets and Family Economies in Europe and North America since 1830," *Economic History Review* 53, no. 3 (2000), 409–428.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 124.

5. Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xii.

6. *Ibid.*, 76.

7. *Ibid.*, xiii.

8. Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

9. See "Raising Your Quarter-Million Dollar Baby," <http://moneycentral.msn.com/content/CollegeandFamily/Raisekids/P37245> (page not accessible).