

Enslavement of Children, or Chrysalization of Class

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The negro slaves of the South are the happiest, and, in some sense, the freest people in the world....They enjoy liberty, because they are oppressed neither by care nor labor.¹

This essay shows that the emergence of modern childhood can be explained by a need to secure unpaid labor of school-aged children by means of extra-economic coercion. Pre-modern Europe needed to compel a growing segment of the population to participate in unpaid work of school learning. It was accomplished by creating a special group with limited rights and by convincing everyone that the labor of schooling is actually a kind of service provided to children. Ultimately, the modern conception of childhood was born of power relations formed by economic necessity. The modern redefinition of childhood is a special case of social class formation. To support the claim, I rely mainly on Philippe Ariès's account. Foucault, Bourdieu, and Marx provided ways of thinking about mechanics of power and the nature of class.

I begin with a disclaimer: the main thesis of Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood* is overstated. "No doubt," writes Ariès, "the discovery of childhood began in the thirteenth century, and its progress has can be traced in history of art in the fifteenth and sixteenth century."² The "no doubt" clause usually appears to prop up weaker arguments. It is very unlikely that, after Antiquity, Europeans had forgotten what children were. Age grouping is probably the most commonly noted anthropological phenomenon, and why should Medieval Europe be an exception? Some of Ariès's evidence is dubious, too.³ For example, he thinks that medieval artists failed to perceive distinct physical features of children and depicted them as smaller adults. Aesthetic preferences can explain this much better. Ariès is not a historian in the traditional sense; rather, he is a thinker like Foucault, if of a smaller caliber. His analytic descriptions are worth more than his conclusions.

Here is how to save Ariès's thesis from its author. Almost any way of grouping people may or may not be used in power relations. Some differences are completely culturally based (caste, lineage, religion, ethnicity, class), while others use a biological marker (sex), race, and possibly sexual orientation). In the case of biological markers, one can always tell the difference between a man and a woman, a child and an adult, or dark skin versus light skin, but making those distinctions significant is a feature of a given society's power techniques. Childhood is one of such categories, loosely based on biology, but utilized in a specific form of a power relationship. Europeans, like all humans, have always known that children are physically and developmentally different from adults. What Ariès describes is an instance of reinvention rather than invention of childhood to accommodate a new form of division of labor.

REINVENTION OF CHILDHOOD

Ariès demonstrates several means by which childhood was redefined in the European societies at the end of the Middle Ages, including distinctive dress,

segregation from adults in play and work, exaggeration of children's immaturity, the idea of childhood innocence that needs to be preserved, linking schooling to biological age, stripping students of political self-governance and withdrawal of many previously existing rights, corporal punishment and intrusive supervision. The history of childhood resembles the formation of subjugated groups such as lower classes, women, and the non-European races. The same legal and cultural mechanisms, the same rhetorical techniques, and the same ideological moves were employed. Moreover, children were symbolically linked to and compared with such groups already subjugated.

Ariès describes the appearance of a special dress to set children aside from adults. "Every social nuance had its corresponding sign in clothing. At the end of the sixteenth century, custom dictated that childhood, henceforth recognized as a separate entity, should also have its special costume." Ariès notes that "boys were the first specialized children"; their dress was made distinct much sooner, perhaps because boys began going to school in large numbers in the late sixteenth century (CC, 57). Three elements separated a middle class boy's dress from that of an adult: it was archaic, effeminized, and reminiscent of lower classes. The symbolism here is quite clear: children were linked to the backwards times and to old, feeble people. Boys were made to look like girls, a reference to another dominated group. Finally, the link to the lower class evoked imagery of subordination. Sailor's suits, short pants, and militaristic uniform, all of these signified patterns of subordination not just to adult authority, but to the authority of adult institutions such as school. Interestingly, the children's dress fashions did not penetrate the lower classes: "They kept up the old way of life which made no distinction between children and adults, in dress or in work or in play" (CC, 61). This happened because lower class kids did not go to school, so there was no need to subjugate them beyond already available class and social status domination.

There were also claims of innocence. Asserting that children are not supposed to have sexual desire or violent impulses creates a whole class of young deviants and helps keep other children in check. Ariès writes (approvingly, one must note) that, towards the end of the sixteenth century, "certain pedagogues...refused to allow children to be given indecent books any longer. The idea originated of providing expurgated editions of the classics for the use of children. This was a very important stage, which maybe regarded as marking the beginning of respect for childhood" (CC, 109). Women constituted another group whose submission was assured by the presumption of innocence. If women and children as groups are *by nature* innocent, then one has to make sure each individual child and woman are made to comply with their "nature" by any means necessary. The idea of keeping children ignorant of sexual matters is but a sophisticated way of control. If we assume that children are not supposed to have sexual (or any other bodily) desires, any manifestations of such will serve as evidence of their corruption, and therefore justify their dependency on adult authority. The same line of reasoning was later extended to young adults when G. Stanley Hall invented the notion of adolescence.⁴ The obsession with youth sexuality is stronger now than ever before. Various abstinence movements, sex

education, and teacher-student sex scandals all drive home the same point: young people need supervision, because otherwise they might develop wrong desires. And, if their desires look exactly like ours, well, they are young and therefore must not have those desires.

Linked to innocence was the idea of immaturity: “the better to distinguish schoolboys from adults, it was necessary to exaggerate the puerility of their characters, even of the oldest among them” (CC, 164). The presumption of immaturity is the basic justification for limiting children’s electoral, property, and personal rights, as well as the institution of compulsory education. “The concept of the separate nature of childhood, of its difference from the world of adults, began with the elementary concept of its weakness, which brought it down to the lowest social strata” (CC, 262). There is a reason to believe that immaturity is not only greatly exaggerated, but is specifically trained, created. Consider the classic experiments of Jean Piaget. He has shown that young children’s cognition is different: they cannot comprehend laws of conservation; they believe that a row of six bids widely spaced has more bids than a row with the same number of bids positioned closer together. James McGarrigle and Margaret Donaldson have demonstrated that children react to the expectations of the adult conducting the experiment, while they actually understand the conservation laws.⁵ In general, children’s alleged immaturity may be a result as much of social expectations as of innate limitations. I venture to say that most adults would exhibit immature behavior if they were put in a high school, made to live with their parents, and forbidden to have sex.

The emergence of childhood had all the signs of political struggle. Ariès describes in detail how, until the end of Middle Ages, student life was governed by “traditional customs of comradeship and self-government” (CC, 253). Yet, as early as the fifteenth century, ecclesiastic and civil authorities systematically sought to strip the student societies of self-governance. This was not met with indifference, but resulted in violent, sometimes armed confrontations between students and authorities. In the middle of the fifteenth century, certain aristocrats had funded houses, or colleges, at the University of Paris for poor students. Soon after, well-to-do families started to send their own offspring to the colleges because of their stricter discipline. Ariès comments,

Thus with the institution of the college appeared a feeling unknown to the Middle Ages and which would grow in strength until the end of the nineteenth century: revulsion at the idea of mingling of the ages. Henceforth schoolboys would tend to be separated from adults and submitted to a discipline peculiar to their position. (CC, 156)

Eventually, a new system of discipline gradually emerged. “This system was distinguished by three principal characteristics: constant supervision, informing raised to the level of an institution and a principle of government, and the extended application of corporal punishment” (CC, 254). Corporal punishment, virtually unheard of till the end of fourteenth century, had become common and brutal. Initially applied only to the youngest and the poorest of students, by the sixteenth century, corporal punishment had become ubiquitous. In the adult world, being subjected to corporal punishment was a marker of lower class; students of all classes suffered from humiliating public beatings (CC, 261).

In the second half of the eighteenth century, French colleges (but not English schools) have largely abandoned both corporal punishment and the use of student informants. It was not so much a sign of liberation as an advent of a more militaristic model of discipline. After Napoleon I, French schools resembled barracks more than a cloister. Ariès believes that this development indicated the birth of adolescence. “This notion of adolescence was to bring about a major transformation of education: the pedagogues henceforth attributed a moral value to uniform and discipline” (CC, 267). The militarization of schooling could be viewed as the replacement of compulsion mechanism. Schooling was equated with service and sacrifice. The ethics of toughness and heroism is nothing but a labor extraction mechanism, and an ideological justification for unpaid labor. “The correlation of the adolescent and the soldier, in school, resulted in an emphasis on characteristics such as toughness and virility which had hitherto been neglected and which henceforth were valued for themselves” (CC, 267).

Ariès believes the subjugation of children was well worth the pain:

The solicitude of family, Church, moralists and administrators deprived the child of the freedom he had hitherto enjoyed among adults. It inflicted on him the birch, the prison cell — in a word, the punishments usually reserved for convicts from the lowest strata of society. But this severity was the expression of a very different feeling from the old indifference: an obsessive love which was to dominate society from the eighteenth century on. (CC, 413)

Well, obsessive love is a particular way of channeling the affective currents to forge dependency and to achieve compliance. Ariès falls victim to what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence, that is, “the violence which extorts submission, which is not perceived as such, based on ‘collective expectations’ or socially inculcated beliefs.”⁶ The use of such violence has one major consequence: “the transfiguration of relations of domination into affective relations.”⁷ This is what happened to childhood, but *why* it happened can be explained by one word: schooling.

SCHOOL CHILDREN AS CLASS

Ariès documents a clear connection between childhood and schooling, but does not explain the causes for the gradual emergence of the new childhood. He claims that children had become relatively much more important; therefore, adults paid more attention to them and invested in their education. Ariès remains prisoner of an assumption that education in general and schooling in particular benefit mostly its bearer, so learning is self-enriching and self-fulfilling work. I would argue that the very notion of education as self-enriching or a vehicle of upward social mobility was an ideology imposed on children to ensure their compliance with the society’s demands. It was an act of symbolic violence with economic purposes.

The gradual emergence of the knowledge-intensive economy revealed one crucial bottleneck: education. Starting with the invention of book printing, human knowledge became remarkably easy to accumulate and transmit; machines and division of labor made most forms of labor infinitely more productive. The cost of such a transition is that now many more people need to learn to use all this information. The laborer, a crucial component of information-labor cycle, has a nasty habit of dying and taking all his knowledge to the grave. To combat this

constant leak of knowledge, we have developed a huge industry that fills the new workers with knowledge and attitudes needed in the new economy.

How does one secure sufficient labor for the new industry? Forced labor came as an obvious solution, and it always comes packaged with certain cultural/political tools. Linking schooling to biological age is a successful attempt to confine the labor of schooling to a specific, easily identifiable group. Just as racial slavery is a more efficient way of domination than a race-neutral one, equating childhood with studenthood uses a preexisting biological marker to define a newly subjugated group. The confinement and strict discipline of schooling, the subjugation of children served one main purpose; to make more students work harder and without pay. Efficiency gains in school labor come from stricter discipline, which in turn, means shortening of free time, and increase of on-task time. To this day, this is the main way to gain productivity of school learning; it is not better teaching methods or better curriculum. This has to do with specifics of learning: unlike any other labor, its efficiency directly depends on effort, and such labor cannot be significantly automated or specialized and divided. Learning is still extremely time consuming, tedious, and labor-intensive; it is an archaic kind of work characteristic of pre-industrial civilizations. By its very nature, learning is difficult, because the results are proportional to effort, so no machine will do much good. The drudgery has been leaving fields and factories only to reappear in schoolhouses. Such a shift has created a new social class of school-aged students.

Can this new group be called a class? Vladimir Lenin provided the best Marxist definition of class for Marx himself had not done so.

Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it.⁸

The definition fits well. K-12 students are a group of people who work in a specific industry, performing a specialized form of labor. The society uses a number of legal and cultural devices to make sure students perform the required work. They are denied basic legal rights and are treated by a separate legal system. The state exercises some ownership rights over the persons of children through provisions of school authority. The school-aged children cannot own property and are legally barred from entering the existing free labor market. This is to ensure that they perform only one form of labor: school learning. Law compels them to attend school, and their parents to ensure such attendance. Their economic situation is similar to some other forms of non-free labor, such as indentured servants of colonial America or bonded laborers of the British Empire. However, children's legal condition is more similar to chattel slavery.⁹ Parents act like owners whose rights are regulated: children cannot be sold, but cannot practically be emancipated. The state also monitors humane treatment of children (which was also common in North American slavery). The parental authority over children more and more looks like it is delegated to parents by the state, which has an overriding interest in ensuring large and uninterrupted supply of student labor.

The phenomenon of non-free, or bonded labor, is common throughout the world. The capitalist labor markets have never been comprehensive, and always included large islands of non-market labor relations: the domestic labor of women, military service (both conscripted and voluntary), the modern New World slavery, serfdom, peonage, and other forms of bonded labor, and volunteerism. Although we may admire some institutions on this list, and condemn others, this does not change the deep economic affinity of these forms of labor: they all require extra-economic mechanisms because they all are unpaid or underpaid. In some cases, they depend on brutal force, in others, on gentle ideological coercion, and in most, on the force of law. Moreover, the contemporary labor market uses multiple ways of obtaining labor at significant discounts. Examples of such semi-free labor are both legal and illegal immigrants, women, and minorities. Yet compulsory schooling dwarfs any other forms of non-free labor by the number of workers employed and value produced by the industry: almost one-fifth of the American population are students.

CHRYSALIZATION

Ariès was confused by the apparent ambivalence of the emerging childhood: it had all the signs of subjugation, and yet it apparently resulted in betterment for children. The liberty afforded to children in the Middle Ages is appealing if a bit shocking, and yet their well-organized, disciplined modern status can be interpreted as a sign of general progress. From the very beginning, the formation of the new subjugated class has been disguised as an act of liberation, which is typical of symbolic violence. I would argue that such a disguise is strictly ideological and does not alter the underlying relationship of economic exploitation. Children are another class of bound laborers, whose work benefits the public at large to a much greater extent than it benefits the individual. Now, the objections to my claim are obvious. How can school work be interpreted as exploitation if it so clearly benefits children themselves? After all, there is a direct link between the level of education and lifetime income. Moreover, the demand for more education is common among all classes of our society, so even if children often do not want to learn, their parents clearly want them to attend school. Inequalities in educational opportunity are one of the strongest grievances of the lower classes.

A proper response to these objections would take me well beyond the limits of this paper. In essence, yes, income rises with years of schooling, but not in a straight rising line. Rather, it is a flat line in the first twelve years of schooling or so; then there is sharp exponent growth. The difference in income between a high school graduate and a dropout is very small. Primary and secondary schooling is a ladder one climbs up only to get to the bottom of the social pyramid. This means that the years of schooling almost up to high school are essentially worthless to those who will not continue with schooling. Of course, these years are far from worthless to the employers, who get literate janitors and fast food workers without paying anything for it.

Traditional classes implied membership for life for the overwhelming majority of their members. This feature was and still is the main cause of class struggle. Yet, contemporary knowledge-based capitalism has changed this, and nothing in the

notion of *class* requires such vertical separation. Throughout the life span, many people now move from a dominated to dominant group. I will call this phenomenon the chrysalization of class. Like butterflies, we undergo social metamorphosis throughout our lives. For the first few decades of human life, one has to be an economic chrysalis, compelled to perform hard and unpaid labor. Later, a significant part of population will migrate into a more prosperous position; some will also reach retirement age and won't have to work at all. The purpose of the class division is still the same: to extract labor. Yet, the new chrysalized class structure has none of the ills of the struggle. An individual is put into a position where she exploits her younger self for the benefit of the larger society.

Human life looks genuinely different from different vantage points; one may not plausibly describe human life only in terms of development. What is an economic interest of a child? We often assume that it is the same as one of the "potential adult" contained in the child. Indeed, from an adult's point of view, working hard in school is a great choice. However, there is a logical fallacy here: "Because you will thank me in the future, I can force you to do something now." Yet your future thankfulness is a direct result of my present use of force, so it is a case of self-fulfilling prophecy. Does the future anticipated result justify today's denial of rights, and what extent? Comfortable adulthood can justify childhood bondage no more than the cultural achievements of Harlem Renaissance can justify the transatlantic slave trade.

The discussion on intergenerational justice, initiated by Rawls,¹⁰ brings forth the existence of certain ethical obligations to people of the future and of the past.¹¹ The problem is, we do not have relationships of reciprocity with people who do not yet exist, and we do not know their identity (or what they would want). While there is a strong claim in favor of inter-generational justice, it is limited by such considerations. Following a similar logic, we must acknowledge our obligations to the "potential adult," yet such obligations are limited by mere potentiality of such a being, and by our lack of knowledge of his or her preferences. At the very least, we have certain obligations to actual children that are different from our obligations to potential adults. Our obligations to actual children must be governed by the general concepts of justice, which excludes forced labor. Children have a right to exercise their own judgment of what constitutes their benefit, which we may consider erroneous, but cannot deny on the basis of such a consideration.¹²

EMANCIPATION

Compulsory schooling has a much bigger problem than the contemporary reformers of both the Left and the Right appreciate. The long-term prospects of mass schooling are unsustainable. Just like New World slavery, mass schooling can co-exist with labor markets for a long time, but in the end, such a sector conflicts with the rest of the economy and the democratic state. Slavery had an absolute ceiling of productivity, and it constrained development of consumer markets. In addition, the institution so clearly contradicted the democratic ideas that it became ideologically unsustainable. Compulsory schooling represents a sector of economy in many ways resembling American slavery. It is a large industry, thoroughly entangled in the rest

of the social matrix, and our economy depends on it for survival. Even those few who appreciate the unjust nature of compulsory schooling, believe schooling is like holding a wolf by its ears: you don't like it, but you don't dare let go. I suspect that we sing songs to virtues of education mostly out of economic necessity, not out of the instinct of justice. That was exactly the rationale for slavery.

Compulsory schooling has two essential, intrinsic, and unfixable problems. It relies on highly unmotivated labor of young conscripts. It is remarkably inefficient, and must remain so because of the economic conditions in which students operate. Simply put, they lack the incentive. Employers also lack incentive in making sure learning is efficient, because they are not paying for the enormous value of educated workforce. A large chunk of our GDP does not enter into national statistics as school students perform countless hours of arduous and unpaid work. Like any other subsidized resource, unpaid labor of students creates market deformations, and encourages waste. Employers keep encouraging tougher standards and longer duration of education, because even if school reform returns are negligible, they will still benefit by having a bit more educated workforce.

Ideologically and politically, the position of limited rights in which we placed students is also untenable. Despite the newest most scientific findings about the "adolescent brain," eventual emancipation of youth seems inevitable. Moreover, school learning will have to be included in free labor market. Eventually, we would have to pay kids to study, and respect their wishes when they find a better employment.

The short-term prospect is to understand the economic nature of bonded labor, and improve the conditions of students. First, we would need to call schooling what it is — a form of national service students perform for their country, not a great gift they receive. Those who give should get recognition, tangible benefits (for example, guaranteed health benefits tied to school attendance), and some form of collective bargaining. Those who decline to serve cannot be penalized; those who are willing to learn later in life must be afforded a real opportunity to do so. In addition to schoolwork, schools must provide a variety of activities in which students are willing to participate voluntarily.

1. George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1998), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fitzhughcan/fitzcan.html>, 29–30.

2. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage, 1962), 46. This work will be cited as *CC* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. For sustained critique of Ariès, see Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 268–269.

4. G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (New York: D. Appleton, 1904).

5. The description of the famous "naughty bear experiment" is in James McGarrigle and Margaret Donaldson, "Conservation Accidents," *Cognition* 3 (1974): 341–350.

6. Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 103.

7. *Ibid.*, 102.

8. Vladimir Lenin, *A Great Beginning* (1919), in *Collected Works*, vol. 29 (Moscow: Progress, 1972), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/jun/19.htm>.
9. For legal evidence of such a claim, see Diana I. Bonina and Ruth A. Bahe-Jachna, "The Treatment of Children as Chattel in Recent Adoption Decisions," *Human Rights: Journal of the Section of Individual Rights & Responsibilities* 26, no. 2 (1999).
10. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).
11. I acknowledge an extensive use of the debate's summary by Lukas Meyer "Intergenerational Justice," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2003/entries/justice-intergenerational/>
12. This ethical argument is surely insufficient, yet I was unable either to elaborate it within the limits of the paper, or skip it altogether.