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# **EDUCATION AND MODERNITY**

**Dennis O’Keeffe**

**2<sup>nd</sup> IEA Discussion Paper**

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## Introduction and Summary

I want to say something tonight about modernity and in particular modernity's very problematic connections with our educational arrangements. I have accordingly entitled my paper *EDUCATION AND MODERNITY*. I feel bound to touch also on the strange conceit that modernity has now past and that we are in a condition of "Post-Modernity." My main concern, however, will be with a particular economic sociology of education which I hope will both explain some of our educational shortcomings and point the way to eliminating them.

My central positive claim is the unoriginal one that modernity is a mix of private enterprise and legally constituted representative government. I will spell out the key *sociological* features of this mix as well as its economic details. My central critical claim is that our education system has a paradoxically perverse relationship to the modern order. On the one hand, without mass education there could *be* no modernity. On the other hand, the economic arrangements of education do not *themselves* conform to modernity. When we look at contemporary educational organisation, we find some of the features of the very modernity it helps to secure, egregiously missing.

Before I enlarge on today's educational shortcomings, however, I will have to plunge briefly into the problematic quagmire of "modernity." I will say what the so-called "Post-Modernists" seem to me to be saying and also I will dwell a little on how conservative views on modernity differ from libertarian ones. I understand "conservative" to mean "wishing to maintain our traditional civilisation." I understand "libertarian" to mean "wishing to free us from unnecessary laws and regulations and restrictions." There is no necessary tension between these positions. Lots of people are conservative and libertarian. I am for example. The reason a brief digression on conservatism and libertarianism is relevant to my

thesis is easy to explain. Conservatives and libertarians would virtually all take varying degrees of offence at our educational arrangements. Socialists on the other hand will support them overwhelmingly.

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### **The Notion of Modernity**

I take modernity to mean newness of a distinctive kind, in particular economic and political arrangements of a historically novel sort. I refer specifically to a mix of representative law-based government and private enterprise, of the sort Francis Fukuyama had in mind when he wrote his *End of History* book.<sup>1</sup> It is important to emphasise, however, that modernity does not at all mean the absence of ancient, long-standing institutions, such as family, church and monarchy. Indeed intellectually it may be claimed that modern European civilisation, from the eighteenth century, was the first civilisation to take a deep interest in cultures other than its own and was steeped in historical sense. This was the civilisation which created capitalism and democracy but also comparative religion and systematic historical and linguistic analysis.

To return specifically to the socio-economic anatomy of modernity, which Fukuyama does *not* treat in great detail, I suggest four characteristics are involved:

1. In the first instance a widespread accumulation of tradable private property. In a truly modern society, there is a lot of this property and a lot of people possess some of it. The legal forms surrounding ownership are very complex but the key fact is the *alienability* of property. Hernando de Soto has written a famous book on this subject.<sup>2</sup> If assets cannot be traded easily they do not constitute modern capital. They cannot be traded readily if they have insecure legal status, an

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama *The End of History and the Last Man* Free Press, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Hernando de Soto *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* Bantam Press, 2000.

observation confirming the belief that law is the basis of civilisation, and that the market economy despite its crucial importance as civilisation's lawful reproduction-system, is essentially derivative. Modernity perhaps consists in the presence of such a derivative economic reproduction-system.

2. In the second instance a widespread accumulation of *human capital* in the working population. Human capital is enhanced productivity of labour through education, training, migration and health-care. The stock of such human capital increases *pari passu* with the accumulation of physical investment. It is very significant today in the generation of income. Rather little of the labour available in the market now is mere brute labour. Certainly in any rich society the human capital stock will be huge. To distinguish human capital from mere skills, we note that human capital is a matter of deliberate, pondered decisions to commit resources to the protection and or advancement of skills. It presupposes an open society encouraging and permitting such decisions. Nor is knowledge as such to be identified with human capital. When I first visited Poland, I was struck by how well educated its denizens often were as well as how poor they were. Without an elaborate division of labour and without the requisite accumulation of physical capital, both of which will occur only in the presence of effective rights of property, knowledge remains economically inert. It is not then human capital.

3. In the third instance there is a very large middle class. When there are secure property rights at the same time as a dynamic industrial technology, brute labour soon gives way to labour modified by human capital increments. To my knowledge the labour history here has never been written in terms of human capital. What is involved, however, is precisely the growth of the middle class, caused by changes in the division of labour, in favour of new skills and capacities. The old Marxist notion that the contact between the bourgeoisie and the workers produces a

polarisation as the latter are impoverished, has been utterly falsified. The contact in fact produces social reconciliation as the demand for managerial and technical skills, fuelled by scientific and technological advance, creates a new kind of society with more complex and elaborate markets.

In other words the capitalist and the worker are not enemies but allies. The working-class shrinks, the numbers of very wealthy people increase and above all the middle class increases in size, until it becomes, in the late twentieth century, the social norm. These changes express perfectly the *sociological* significance of human capital formation, a very large accumulation of human capital effectively signalling a middle class society.

This large middle class also links the economics with the politics of modernity. When there is a large and affluent middle class, indeed where such a middle class makes up the majority of the population, the social and political order is very easy to legitimate. It legitimates itself, so to speak, there being no bitter dichotomy between minority haves and majority have-nots. The market economy is the sole economic system so far which can create a majority of haves in a given society. This is why refugees want to go to America or Britain. They want to be free; they want to join the haves.

It is probably not sufficiently widely appreciated that in pre-modern societies the rich and the powerful had (or have) endless difficulties controlling the poor and the weak. Sometimes they used force; at other times they used various ideological devices, in particular religious justifications. But social control in such situations is always precarious. Most political systems, past and present, have been unpopular. So unpopular was Communism -- an endless war between the Party and everyone else -- that the Soviets maintained 3 million men under arms in Eastern Europe, in

addition to the vast resources individual Communist states devoted to the suppression of revolt. Market economies are historically novel in not needing to use frequent and systematic violence to achieve control. Because of their affluence, because of their huge middle class, because of their overwhelming foundation in voluntary exchange, because of the regard their members have for the rule of law, because property rights are protected, because property is available, and human capital can readily be formed, modern market economies do not have this terrible problem of a hostile and sullen majority.

Such market economies are, indeed, the first large-scale societies in history which do *not* have it. The Tudors were terrified of the poor, the mob of beggars:

“Hark, hark,  
the dogs do bark,  
the beggars are coming to town;  
some in rags,  
and some in jags  
and one in a velvet gown.”

As late as the seventeenth century in England men and women effectively needed permission to leave their native villages, since they could be returned to their own parishes if they looked as if they might become a charge on the rates of the parishes to which they had moved.<sup>3</sup> In eighteenth century England the army was frequently used as a means of social control.<sup>4</sup> Then, as industrialisation spread the market order, with its opportunities and its rising affluence, the new British economy and polity became increasingly seen as legitimate. The last Marxist-led

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<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Marshall “The Old Poor Law, 1672-1795,” in Eleanora Carus-Wilson (ed) *Essays in Economic History* 1962, Vol. One, Edward Arnold, 1963.

<sup>4</sup> A.J. Hayter *The Army and the Crowd* Macmillan, 1978.

revolt, the one steered by Arthur Scargill, was a final despairing revolt by a disgruntled minority.

Trouble-making intellectuals, often paid from public funds, spend much of their time in modern societies trying to unscramble the spontaneous political and social consensus of capitalism. On the whole they cause trouble, between the races and between the sexes for example, as well as for the police and for the teachers, without their really being able to reverse the advantageous outcomes to which market forces have given rise.<sup>5</sup>

The late Basil Bernstein said that the education system created by progressive intellectuals was an “interrupter” of the bourgeois order.<sup>6</sup> He meant that it slows the market economy down. I will add that it also restrains upward social mobility. It cannot stop the social and economic movements of modernity. Indeed it *mediates* them. Without some system of society-wide identification of talent and aptitude, these characteristics of modernity could not become established. But the way education is organised can and does impede them to some extent. The education system *is* a modernizer, but because of its governing ideologues and the views and policies they force on the system, it is a reluctant, hesitant and neurotic one. The middle class is huge; it would be even bigger if the education system were more efficient. There has been a dramatic reversal of poverty but the policies of educational and welfare leadership have ensured that the poor and ignorant remain far more numerous than they should.

The problem of educational standards illustrates the tensions forcefully. Doubtless the élite who run our schools want education standards to rise. Unfortunately they

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<sup>5</sup> Dennis O’Keeffe *Political Correctness and Public Finance* IEA, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Basil Bernstein “Class and Pedagogies: Visible and Invisible” in *Class, Codes and Control*, Vol.3 Routledge and Kegan Paul 1975.



want other things, like the pursuit of equality and the happiness of children, more. If there were a system of effective private enterprise in education, these false goals <sup>7</sup> would meet resistance from the properly vested interests both of those who wish their children to prosper intellectually and socially *and* of those who wish to make profits by providing their clientele with the education they want for their children. The absence of property rights facilitates producer-capture.

4. The fourth principal characteristic of modernity is a large minority of the population in possession of very high levels of intellectual development, variously in mathematics or science, medicine, social science, arts, philosophy etc. You cannot sustain economic and scientific and technical innovation, and run complex legal and medical systems, unless you have a brilliant élite. Here we are talking about the veritable moguls of human capital. If you want to confirm a conviction that modernity is not a synonym for “utopia,” however, let me point out that there are also millions of illiterates and innumerates in modern society and that the populations of the world’s richest countries are not very well educated on average. One cannot help wistfully wondering how much better things would be if our educational arrangements worked well for the vast majority of citizens. My claim is that privately financed education would produce intellectual improvements across the board.

### **Difficulties in the Idea of Modernity: Post-Modernism**

There are grave difficulties I have not mentioned with the idea of “modernity.” I shall not go into them at length. There are one or two considerations, however, which demand a few words. Let me simply say that the whole concept of “Post-

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<sup>7</sup> Most egalitarian policies are fantasy-mongering; happiness on the other hand is an incidental. I am quite content that children enjoy school; this is not a legitimate philosophical purpose of education however. In a free market, some individuals might choose these aims for their own children. This is quite different from such aims being imposed by bureaucrats.

Modernism,” though very fashionable, is an absurd one. As Solzhenitsyn says, or more or less, “you cannot live after now.”<sup>8</sup> Or as I would put it, in the style of Marx, (Groucho, not Karl), “you cannot get more modern than now. Today is as recent as it gets.”

There is a vast literature on Post-Modernism, for which expression cultural relativism and multiculturalism are almost co-terms. The Post-Modernists argue that cultural boundaries are breaking down. Intellectual absolutes are dissolving. They claim that the “grand narratives” of our culture are losing their force, e.g. the Biblical story, or the idea of European civilisation as a special and different human endeavour. For me the biblical story will never lose its force. As for European civilisation, the idea is due for a rebirth if we can once repudiate successfully the modern habit of intellectual self-denigration.

The most dramatic charge by the Post-Modernists is that our experience is becoming “de-historicized,” the claim being that we are now experientially flattened, suspended in a kind of universal present, or stasis.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this is another version of the globalist thesis, the idea that every place is becoming like every other place. Everyone’s experience is homogenised. Personally, this is what I always found in Communist societies. I do not think it nearly so true of market economies.

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<sup>8</sup> Alexandr Solzhenitsyn “The Relentless Cult of Novelty” in *The Salisbury Review* September 1993, pp.32 to 34. Solzhenitsyn’s exact words (p.34) are: “Whatever the meaning intended for this term, its lexical makeup involves an incongruity: the seeming claim that a person can think and experience *after the period in which he is destined to live.*”

<sup>9</sup> There is a compendious book by the late Madan Sarup on Post-Modernism. This includes very good discussion, though I disagree with most of it, of the two big names, Foucault and Derrida. Sarup was one of the few British neo-Marxists of real brains and erudition. Unfortunately, in abandoning Marx -- something he never fully did in any case -- he did not find Hayek and Friedman, but only these French mischief-makers. So he described the same learning curve as the other fellows, though at a higher level. See Madan Sarup *Post-Structuralism and Post-Modernism* Harvester-Weatsheaf, 1999.

If the Post-Modernists were referring to the academic study of history, or popular familiarity with some of history's great land-marks, they would be right in their claim that the sense of history has withered. I would wryly note, though, that the voices telling us we are de-historicized are the same sorts of voices first raised against the academic teaching of history in our schools. So a group of people destroy an academic tradition and then they, or their ideological look-alikes, call the resulting ignorance of that tradition an eternal present, or loss of historical sense.

The notion that our civilisation is not historically alive is false anyway. Most of the citizens of economic modernity are in one respect at least very aware of past, present and future. At least economically our society is not ahistorical. Our economic life is characterised by widespread, finely tuned calculation, in a large number of separate as well as overlapping markets. The calculations and decisions involved are deeply informed by historical perspective on price movements and relative scarcities and they use past and present comparisons to decide on likely or possible future variations therein. This will always continue to be the case as long as there is an observed rule of law and widely observed property rights. At least as far as economic life is concerned the idea of a de-historicized world is simply nonsense. In more cultural terms one might say that the easiest way to revive the historical sense would be to teach it.

### **Conservatives Proper on Modernity**

On the other hand, for hard-line conservatives, those who believe neither in moral nor in social progress, presumably "modernity" is just an inflated word for "nowadays." Conservatives do not expect the world to be tidy so they will not fully share my discomfort, for example, at the fact that most market economies have socialistic education systems. They might agree that it is a bit of a nuisance but they will not see it as quite the anomaly it is for me. Conservatives proper do not

expect the world to be anything but a collection of “bits and pieces.” “Why should you expect it to cohere?” is their attitude. It is historical philosophy which divides libertarians and conservatives. Both believe in the rule of law and in property rights. Conservatives, however, hold that history has no direction. This is true of a philosopher like Roger Scruton, or historians like Andrew Roberts or Niall Ferguson. For these writers history’s calm or grand periods, its episodic improvements in other words, cannot be relied on to last or even to happen at all. Above all, history never comes to an end for the conservative mind. In this sense Fukuyama’s thesis is merely false. There is in some libertarian musings a kind of formulaic conviction that the free market will take care of all our human worries. I have to agree with the conservatives. There is no final haven or resting place for the ship of humanity.

### **The Concept “Modernity” would be Vacuous if it Meant Everything which Happens to be Around**

As a conservative enthusiast for certain aspects of modern civilisation, I do agree that “modernity” would be a vacuous idea if it referred to everything that happens to be around now. Many nationalisms and some religious movements today seem like atavisms, reversions to more primitive type. The same is shockingly true of many aspects of mass culture, which are parasitic on the wealth of modernity but also abuse it appallingly. The totalitarian movements of the last century were atavisms. They manifested indeed certain horrible ahistorical novelties but also, more importantly, they resembled in uncanny detail the slave states of Asian antiquity and the storage despotisms of pre-Columbian America. The fact that some German scholars wrote bad books about the similarities does not mean that the similarities were not real. <sup>10</sup> The Third Reich was very like the ancient Assyrian empire, with its insatiable military expansionism and unfathomable cruelty. The

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*, 1957.

Soviet Union was very like Pharaonic Egypt or Ancient Mesopotamia, or Peru under the Incas, even if certain German philosophers said so. These various societies were very different from each other in some respects. In common was their indifference or hostility to law as we understand it and their ignorance of or opposition to property rights.

### **All Said and Done, the Market System is the Only Decent Economic Game in Town**

I do not mean by this that I agree with Fukuyama's thesis that the battle of history is over. On the contrary I think that civilisation will always face external enemies and often still worse internal ones. How would one reckon the threat posed to this country by *The Guardian* newspaper compared to that by resurgent Islam? The latter wants to demolish our buildings while the former wants to demolish some of our key institutions. I do agree with Fukuyama, however, that from the standpoint of modernity there seems to be no viable alternative to the market economy and representative government. Soviet-style socialism as a general way of life has lost all appeal and *Brave New World*, which conceives the future as kind of universal Sweden with knobs on, is not much more appealing. The greed of certain corporate moguls today will perhaps give capitalism a bad name for a while; but it will probably not revive the socialist project. My concern with the socialist project is rather the way it lives on in education and welfare without people's seeming to notice.

### **The Economic Apparatus of Modernity and the Educational Shortfall Therein**

In fact the public do try to make rational economic decisions about their children's education. They do for the most part attempt to submit that educational experience to the same calculus they employ for most of their economic affairs. This is natural given the obvious impact of school and university on life-chances. Unfortunately it

is difficult in some respects, because of the economic opacity of education. Parents do not have access, when they are pondering matters of education, to the fine-tuned data they can use for purchasing their groceries, buying their houses, paying for their cars and holidays. It would be good if everyone could work the state-system as effectively as certain leading politicians seem to be able to. Unfortunately many people simply cannot.

We can slightly recast my thesis by saying that one of the features of economic modernity in the richer societies is the extent to which their educational arrangements are not themselves fully paid up examples of the “modern” condition. Modernity *does* include a specialised division of intellectual labour with a large recruitment, but this is a necessary, not a sufficient condition. To meet the full criteria of economic modernity, the organisation of such learning must also itself include as an integral feature the developed apparatus of the modern market. Indeed, this must be true of the large-scale production of all private goods. In the educational arrangements of countries like Britain, we see the contrary and contradictory phenomenon of a socialist organisation of academic life, based on public finance and egalitarian ideologies. Of course there are many market influences at work in education. If there were not, many people would simply revolt and withdraw their children from school. Compulsory education would be unenforceable in a free society if most people thought school had no significance for jobs etc. But the preferences of educational leadership are socialist ones. The DFES is notoriously socialistic, for example.

There are functional reasons for deploring this, as well as value free reasons for trying to explain it. A free society with a dynamic modern economy, a society necessarily characterised by radical intellectual disagreements -- the set of controversies being by definition an infinite one -- cannot afford to rely for the

maintenance and reproduction of its intellectual life on institutions which do not themselves belong to modernity. If economic modernity is given by private property in the means of production, money transactions and the specialised division of labour, it may be asserted that most of the educational institutions of this country typically meet neither of the first two criteria and the third criterion only in an unsatisfactory form.

1. Educational assets are not in the main in the form of disposable private property;
2. Education is mostly within the so-called "social wage," that is to say that it is not bought and sold;
3. The division of specialised intellectual labour within the educational service, is very half-hearted, or if we are more severe in judgement, perversely inadequate. The insistence on the uniform rate for the job, for example, has left us with huge shortages in mathematics and science.

And these initial considerations are only the start of a very long list of inconsistencies with the market economy. Many of these are very little remarked upon. Let us spell out some of them.

### **Education and the Missing Features of the Developed Market Economy**

Consider. In modern education, for the most part there is no owning class, no educational bourgeoisie. Even private schools are not for the most part owned by capitalists. There is an absence of readily tradable educational private property, as anyone who has tried to set up a private school will know. By and large education in this country is organised without property rights, without accounts of profit and loss, without the crucial institution of bankruptcy. In the British case legislation has so contrived things that even in private schools it is difficult to sack a weak or unsatisfactory teacher.

It is in what confronts parents and older children, however, that the economic phenomena of modernity are most glaringly lacking. As far as many families are concerned, there is effectively no *exit* for their children if they find the schools unsatisfactory. There are lots of manipulations. Parents can move location, even change towns, to get good state schooling for their children. The worst plight is that of those many families who either cannot do this because they do not have the required resources or do not know of its importance. It is absurd in any case that anyone should have to move house to get his children decent schooling. The unsatisfactory nature of our educational arrangements is seen in this example above all others. The poorest and most ignorant of people can change supermarkets or utility-suppliers. Millions of our young people, however, are caught helplessly in schools their parents feel rage about but are in no position to extract them from.

### **Public Finance of Education Changes the Free Market Calculus**

There are also perverse educational dynamics some of which almost no one seems to have noticed. With respect to a free market economy, the standard assumption of economics is that the economic system is driven by the demands of citizens, with direct regard to their own perceived wants. In a socialist economy the assumption is that experts can plan the output of society in relation to their understanding of the population's *needs*. The economic system is thus supply-driven. In terms of whole societies, the argument in favour of supply-dominance is pretty well dead. Take your pick of North Korea or Cuba. Where argument still rages, however, is in relation to the "socialist pockets" as I elect to call them, of predominantly free enterprise economies. The planners and their endless set of needs are still well and truly alive in education.



### **Ideological Convictions and Public Habituation**

In the case of British education we can identify support for the *status quo* in the convictions of committed socialist intellectuals and in the habituation of millions of citizens. What though, does the public financing of education do to the average citizen vis à vis the calculus of scarcity and choice? It changes that calculus. Because the demand is financed with funds he does not have to provide himself, the consumer is pushed away from investment and towards consumption. He is led to think less about future income and enjoyment and more about present enjoyment. Thus the ratio of curricular consumption to investment rises. There will be more soft social science and less arduous study undertaken, in science or foreign languages, for example. Both consumption and investment, however, will be undertaken more frivolously. So there will also be more curricular *waste*. This distortion is an important and little understood phenomenon, a part of what I call “subsidised innovation.” It seems to me far more important than the alleged curricular power of whites, or men or heterosexuals or Western culture. More dramatic by far, however, are the changes wrought by subsidised innovation on the supply side, to which we turn in the next section.

### **The Two Regulatory Modes of British Education: Subsidised Innovation and Bureaucratic Centralism**

Here let us note two organisational aspects of modern education which underpin all the arrangements in our nationalised education system. Both are offensive to the free society. One is a parasite of economic activity in such a free society, since it operates speculatively using other people’s resources. Just above, I called this mode “subsidised innovation.” It is even more destructive on the supply side than on the demand side. Money was available at training college and in schools when it was decided in the 1960s by certain authorities that we do not need rote spelling, or the rote learning of tables, or the general exercise of memory by factual mastery

of anything much. It was similarly decided on the basis of the taxpayer's money that children are naturally good and do not have to be burdened with elaborate moral training. Later on the same innovators pressed for the introduction of the obsessions with race and sex and cultural relativism that have made up such a large part of the intellectual diet of teacher education in the last few decades.

All this innovation was privately secured, privatisation of decision-making, indeed. Unfortunately it was publicly paid for. And the vast costs have been socialised, passed on to the general taxpayer. Illiteracy, for example, has been socialised under the banner of "special needs." Unfortunately, the reforming British governments of the 1980s appeared not to understand what was wrong. Worse, they tried to fix it by imposing on the system a mode of control with an even worse track record. This is the ancient system of governance managed by the Pharaohs, the Chinese Emperors and the Mongol Khans, the system the Spaniards found among the more developed cultures of the Americas. We call it "bureaucratic centralism." It must be said that no one who had read Hayek could possibly have supported its use in education or anywhere else. Yet in the 1980s the most successful economic management of British modernity, the Thatcher dispensation, allowed its civil servants to impose on schools in England and Wales the "National Curriculum," a bureaucratic Leviathan so strange and alien to British ways, that it is a wonder Lenin did not sit up in his coffin and grin at its introduction.

The idea of "planning" the nation's intellectual life on a centralised basis is a dire conceit on the lines of the Soviet model. The Soviets thought they knew the needs of the Russian people. But the whole idea is misconceived. Their needs mattered not a fig. What required attending to was not their needs but their *wants*, and wants are something no socialist system can ever or will ever be able to minister to. The

concept “need” presupposes that there are goods which people must have, so important they can be thought of as necessities, while non-necessities must be thought of as luxuries. Economic science knows no such distinction, which is one of the myths of socialism. A child will say “I want a lolly.” An adult may say, “I need a drink.” The child’s word-choice is consistent with economic science; the adult’s is not. Questions of curriculum, pedagogy and moral management do not differ in this regard from other questions of consumer/citizen preference. Parents and children have curricular and pedagogic and disciplinary wants with regard to education, not needs.

We do not know what curriculum, what teaching, what examination modes, what kind of discipline the public favour till we let them demonstrate these wants via their money demands. We cannot gather to a bureaucratic centre all the subject information etc., which a properly modern education system must supply to the public. The variety of educational wants is hugely complex, and endlessly shifting and recomposing. One family wants science, another favours arts and another sociology. Some people like whole-class teaching, others project work. Certain citizens, probably a majority, want strong discipline at school. Others reject this as repressive. There is no one model fitting all comers. This complexity does not permit centralised systematisation. Such a codification simply cannot be done. All that gets codified is the supply preferences and solecisms of the bureaucratic élite. And indeed, what is happening today is that these two unsatisfactory modes -- subsidised innovation and bureaucratic centralism -- are becoming intertwined. Subsidised innovation and bureaucratic centralism have now linked up.

This unholy mess can never be rectified without recourse to the essence of economic modernity: competition. Competition means: fluid markets, money transactions, extensive property rights and a flexible, rational division of labour.

Education necessitates markets, not planners. It calls for the rule of parents, not of teacher trainers, inspectors and civil servants. Education can function adequately only on the basis of money transactions, not as part of the social wage. Education demands property rights. People should own the schools and colleges in which education takes place, otherwise no one will ever be held responsible for their success or failure. There has to be an educational bourgeoisie, its sound management rewarded and its bad management penalised. There should be a voucher scheme which endorses the rights of individuals, enabling them to seek better schools than the basic voucher will purchase, at their own expense. Our families and their children want exit from bad schools, not voice to complain about them.

### **One Longish Obiter**

Please allow me one longish *obiter*. On the question of teacher education, it is high time we exchanged all the claptrap about race and so-called “gender” and Anglocentric culture and began talking instead about litter and graffiti and bad manners and how to change them, and private and public property and how to protect them. I spent more than a quarter of a century in teacher education and neither in the hundreds of schools I visited nor in the college where I worked, did I ever hear any genuine moral teaching, either in Ten Commandments form or in terms of secular humanism.

Indeed it is worth saying that the Catholic elementary school where I began my education during the Second World War, was vastly superior in its general education to that of any primary school I have been in to in recent decades. In our eleven plus year there were 53 children in the scholarship class. All of them could read and had basic numeracy and they had all learned the Ten Commandments. I have never been in a class in any primary school in recent times where such

standards and such moral order are achieved. In many parts of the country you would have to go to an expensive private school to find such success today. It is probable that none of our teachers, Irish nuns mostly, had a degree. Some would also argue that they were often cruel. The standards they achieved, however, with pupils from very low income families, speak for themselves. So maybe they did love the children, though they did not say so, more than those who repeat loudly how much they love them whilst neglecting to teach them anything worthwhile. In any event the sisters' outlook was very different from that of the contemporary progressive ascendancy in primary education, conducted under perverse arrangements set by *soi-disant* experts who identify false ills and neglect real ones.

### **A Summing Up**

I have argued that law is the basis of civilisation, and that a market economy is a derivative of legally established property rights. I have defended the concept of modernity from its post-modernist critics, arguing that general economic life in countries like ours is still properly to be characterised as “modern.” I have sought to show that educational arrangements in Britain do not themselves share the characteristic features of economic modernity, namely institutionalised competition, widespread private property, a fully developed bourgeoisie, money transactions, fully specialised division of labour, consumer-driven dynamics, proper accounting and the institution of bankruptcy for failing practice. I have nowhere argued, however, that the system fails for most people. The public would not tolerate such an outcome. But education, along with health-care, remains a nationalised industry, and the conditions which might have kept it intellectually viable have long passed. Our educational arrangements cause permanent underperformance and are outrageous to common sense as well as to economic logic.

### **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Some time after this lecture had been delivered, Andrea Gabb pointed out that as a child in Slovakia she had received an excellent education in the state schools. Does not this fact clash with my general thesis that the woes of education in countries like Britain are for the most part socialist woes? In fact it does not. The dynamics of education are different as between general socialism e.g. Communist Slovakia, and sectoral socialism, e.g. Great Britain. In Communist countries, once the patina of genuflectory Marxism had been scraped off, there was an old fashioned European curriculum underneath. The centralised Communist power did not allow local and decentralised experimentation in the schools. In Western countries, by contrast, antinomian experiment and posturing became widespread, especially from the 1960s onwards, and the whole point of “subsidised innovation” as I called it in my lecture, was that it permitted a kind of mocking imitation of the free society, in so far as free wheeling intellectual activity was paid for by the public, and private individuals were able to impose their self-indulgent theorising at the public expense. Had the progressive child-centred incubus not entered British education so forcefully, especially in the late 1950s and 1960s, British education would have remained the same as that in Communist Europe, indeed better than that, since it would not have had the Marxist carapace.

The question and answer session directly following the lecture was opened by Dr Sean Gabb. Was it not the case, he asked, that Political Correctness had made its way to this country from the United States, where it had taken root in mainly *private* universities? My reply was that the prestigious private Universities of America are not as private as they look, since these institutions receive huge Federal funds. Secondly, though it is true that Political Correctness came eastwards across the Atlantic, the intellectual inspiration for this movement was mostly French, involving in particular the writings of Foucault and Derrida, and it has to be said, moreover,

that there is no nonsense which certain American and British intellectuals will not believe, provided only that it was written initially in French.

Another member of the audience asked what I understood by “education.” I said I understood it in very traditional terms, to be the pursuit of what is true or beautiful or morally binding on us, and that these aims of education are all too often marginalized or ignored. Professor David Conway raised a question which had exercised me a great deal during the writing of this inaugural lecture. Is there not, he asked, an exclusive and highly demanding education, identified by the wearing of academic dress, for example, which has no bearing on the market and its imperatives? My response was that such a model does not apply to mass enrolments. It could be viable only when very small numbers of people attend universities. Professor David Marsland’s later response to Professor Conway, was that the market would anyway supply universities catering for this kind of intellectual preference.

Professor Julian Morris recalled Adam Smith’s observation that professors who were paid taught far better than those who were not. His main query concerned my view on the role of vouchers. Vouchers in my view are a transitional mechanism, needed because the level of taxation is penal. If taxation were significantly curtailed, vouchers would not be necessary.

Ruth Newell asked whether, in view of my long burden of complaint, education ought to be seen as involving the happiness of the children. Was education to be enjoyable? My response was first to the effect that in education we must in all duty seek to get the measure of the world, to see what it is like. Education must not overlook or deny the bad things in the world. It must take them into account. This does not at all imply a negative reckoning overall. Indeed there is something very

wrong in the fashionable significance among educated people granted to the work of visceral pessimists like Samuel Beckett. A dark view of the world now also informs much of the school and university curriculum. Indeed it is not too much to say that much of the conduct of education is now steeped in despair. A child can be terrified by environmentalism when he or she is at the primary stage and taught to disdain high culture and our political history as an adolescent, before moving to a degree course infused with the deadly pessimism of political correctness. The most widely read “philosopher” in British higher education at present is the late French nihilist Michel Foucault, who believed that there is no such thing as the human subject, all of us being no more than the meeting point of various power structures. Overall, the atmosphere pervading much of the curriculum is so gloomy that at times it could put one in mind, though without the unforgettable poetry, of Macbeth’s terrifying and despairing rejection of life:

Life’s but a walking shadow,  
A poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot,  
Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

This dreadful pessimism is at the heart of modern educational arrangements. It is the vacuum left by the collapse of utopian socialism and related egalitarian fantasies. The glibly optimistic egalitarianism of the early Enlightenment has now yielded to an equally false egalitarianism of hopelessness. My criticism of education as now constituted does *not* signify a rejection of the world. It is on the contrary, optimism which is the educational imperative for those who seek a free society, a viewpoint which, as Professor David Marsland later pointed out to me in writing, was urged upon us as a moral duty by Karl Popper. The discussion ended



with my quoting as apposite to this theme, the closing lines of the marvellous wartime song by Burton Lane and Ralph Freed, *How About You?*

They say the world's in a dreadful state,

Too bad to contemplate,

Maybe it's true;

But I like it,

How about you?