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# **The Social Importance of the Modern School**

**by Emma Goldman**

To fully grasp the social importance of the Modern School, we must understand first the school as it is being operated today, and secondly the idea underlying the modern educational movement.

What, then, is the school of today, no matter whether public, private, or parochial?

It is for the child what the prison is for the convict and the barracks for the soldier--a place where everything is being used to break the will of the child, and then to pound, knead, and shape it into a being utterly foreign to itself.

I do not mean to say that this process is carried on consciously; it is but a part of a system which can maintain itself only through absolute discipline and uniformity; therein, I think, lies the greatest crime of present-day society.

Naturally, the method of breaking man's will must begin at a very early age; that is, with the child, because at that time the human mind is most pliable; just as acrobats and contortionists, in order to achieve skill over their muscles, begin to drill and exercise when the muscles are still pliable.

The very notion that knowledge can be obtained only in school through systematic drilling, and that school time is the only period during which knowledge may be acquired, is in itself so preposterous as to completely condemn our system of education as arbitrary and useless.

Supposing anyone were to suggest that the best results for the individual and society could be derived through compulsory feeding. Would not the most ignorant rebel against such a stupid procedure? And yet the stomach has far greater adaptability to almost any situation than the brain. With all that, we find it quite natural to have compulsory mental feeding.

Indeed, we actually consider ourselves superior to other nations, because we have evolved a compulsory brain tube through which, for a certain number of hours every day, and for so many years, we can force into the child's mind a large quantity of mental nutrition.

Emerson said sixty years ago, "We are students of words; we are shut up in schools and colleges for ten or fifteen years and come out a bag of wind, a memory of words, and do not know a thing." Since these wise words were written, America has reached the very omnipotence of a school system, and yet we are face to face with the fact of complete impotence in results.

The great harm done by our system of education is not so much that it teaches nothing worth knowing, that it helps to perpetuate privileged classes, that it assists them in the criminal procedure of robbing and exploiting the masses; the harm of the system lies in its boastful proclamation that it stands for true education, thereby enslaving the masses a great deal more than could an absolute ruler.

Almost everyone in America, liberals and radicals included, believes that the Modern School for European countries is a great idea, but that it is unnecessary for us. "Look at our opportunities," they proclaim.

As a matter of fact, the modern methods of education are needed in America much more than in

Spain or in any other country, because nowhere is there such little regard for personal liberty and originality of thought. Uniformity and imitation is our motto. From the very moment of birth until life ceases this motto is imposed upon every child as the only possible path to success. There is not a teacher or educator in America who could keep his position if he dared show the least tendency to break through uniformity and imitation.

In New York a high school teacher, Henrietta Rodman, in her literature class, explained to her girls the relation of George Eliot to Lewes.\* A little girl raised in a Catholic home, and the supreme result of discipline and uniformity, related the classroom incident to her mother. The latter reported it to the priest, and the priest saw fit to report Miss Rodman to the Board of Education. Remember, in America the State and Church are separate institutions, yet the Board of Education called Miss Rodman to account and made it very clear to her that if she were to permit herself any such liberties again she would be dismissed from her post.

In Newark, New Jersey, Mr. Stewart, a very efficient high school teacher, presided at the Ferrer Memorial meeting, thereby insulting the Catholics of that city, who promptly entered a protest with the Board of Education. Mr. Stewart was put on trial and was compelled to apologize in order to keep his position. In fact, our halls of learning, from the public school to the university, are but straitjackets for teachers as well as pupils, simply because a straitjacket of the mind is the greatest guarantee for a dull, colorless, inert mass moving like a pack of sheep between two high walls.

I think it is high time that all advanced people should be clear on this point, that our present system of economic and political dependence is maintained not so much by wealth and courts as it is by an inert mass of humanity, drilled and pounded into absolute uniformity, and that the school today represents the most efficient medium to accomplish that end. I do not think that I am exaggerating, nor that I stand alone in this position; I quote from an article in *Mother Earth* of September 1910 by Dr. Hailman, a brilliant schoolteacher with nearly twenty-five years of experience, and this is what he has to say:

Our schools have failed because they rest upon compulsion and restraint. Children are arbitrarily commanded what, when, and how to do things. Initiative and originality, self-expression, and individuality are tabooed. . . It is deemed possible and important that all should be interested in the same things, in the same sequence, and at the same time. The worship of the idol of uniformity continues openly and quietly. And to make doubly sure that there shall be no heterodox interference, school supervision dictates every step and even the manner and mode of it, so that disturbing initiative or originality and the rest may not enter by way of the teacher. We still hear overmuch of order, of methods, of system, of discipline, in the death dealing sense of long ago; and these aim at repression rather than at the liberation of life.

Under the circumstances teachers are mere tools, automatons who perpetuate a machine that turns out automatons. They persist in forcing their knowledge upon the pupil, ignore or repress their instinctive yearning for use and beauty, and drag or drive them in an ill-named, logical course, into spiritless drill. They substitute for natural inner incentives that fear no difficulty and shrink from no effort, incentives of external compulsion and artificial bribes, which, usually based upon fear or upon anti-social greed or rivalry, arrest development of joy in the work for its own sake, are hostile to purposeful doing, quench the ardor of creative initiative and the fervor of social service. and substitute for these abiding motives, transient, perishable caprice.

It goes without saying that the child becomes stunted, that its mind is dulled, and that its very being becomes warped, thus making it unfit to take its place in the social struggle as an independent factor. Indeed, there is nothing hated so much in the world today as independent factors in whatever line.

The Modern School repudiates utterly this pernicious and truly criminal system of education. It maintains that there is no more harmony between compulsion and education than there is between tyranny and liberty; the two being as far apart as the poles. The underlying principle of the Modern School is this: education is a process of drawing out, not of driving in; it aims at the possibility that the child should be left free to develop spontaneously, directing his own efforts and choosing the branches of knowledge which he desires to study. That, therefore, the teacher, instead of opposing, or presenting as authoritative his own opinions, predilections, or beliefs should be a sensitive instrument responding to the needs of the child as they are at any time manifested; a channel through which the child may attain so much of the ordered knowledge of the world, as he shows himself ready to receive and assimilate. Scientific, demonstrable facts in the Modern School will be presented as facts, but no interpretation of theory--social, political, or religious--will be presented as having in itself such sanction, or intellectual sovereignty, as precludes the right to criticize or disbelieve.

The Modern School, then, must be *libertarian*. Each pupil must be left free to his true self. The main object of the school is the promotion of the harmonious development of all of the faculties latent in the child. There can be no coercion in the Modern School, nor any such rules or regulations. The teacher may well evoke, through his own enthusiasm and nobility of character, the latent enthusiasm and nobility of his pupils, but he will overstep the liberties of his function as soon as he attempts to force the child in any way whatsoever. To discipline a child is invariably to set up a false moral standard, since the child is thereby led to suppose that punishment is something to be imposed upon him from without, by a person more powerful; instead of being a natural and unavoidable reaction and result of his own acts.

The social purpose of the Modern School is to develop the individual through knowledge and the free play of characteristic traits, so that he may become a social being, because he has learned to know- himself, to know his relation to his fellow-men, and to realize himself in a harmonious blending with society.

Naturally, the Modern School does not propose to throw aside all that educators have learned through the mistakes of the past. But though it will accept from past experience, it must at all times employ methods and materials that will tend to promote the self-expression of the child. To illustrate: the way composition is taught in our present-day school, the child is rarely allowed to use either judgment or free initiative. The Modern School aims to teach composition through original themes on topics chosen by the pupils from experience in their own lives; stories and sketches are suggested by the imaginative or actual experience of the pupils.

This new method immediately opens up a new vista of possibilities. Children are extremely impressionable, and very vivid; besides not yet having been pounded into uniformity, their experience will inevitably contain much more originality, as well as beauty, than that of the teacher; also it is reasonable to assume that the child is intensely interested in the things which concern his life. Must not, then, composition based upon the experience and imagination of the pupil furnish greater material for thought and development than can be derived from the clocklike method of today which is, at best, nothing but imitation?

Everyone at all conversant with the present method of education knows that in teaching history the child is being taught what Carlyle has called a "compilation of lies." A king here, a president there, and a few heroes who are to be worshipped after death make up the usual material which constitutes history. The Modern School, in teaching history, must bring before the child a panorama of dramatic periods and incidents, illustrative of the main movements and epochs of human development. It must, therefore, help to develop an appreciation in the child of the struggle of past generations for progress and liberty, and thereby develop a respect for every truth that aims to emancipate the human race. The underlying principle of the Modern School is to make impossible the mere instructionist: the instructionist blinded by his paltry specialty to the full life it is meant to serve; the narrow-minded worshipper of uniformity; the small-soured reactionary who cries for

"more spelling and arithmetic and less life"; the self-sufficient apostle of consolation, who in his worship of what has been fails to see what is and what ought to be; the stupid adherent of a decaying age who makes war upon the fresh vigor that is sprouting from the soil--all these the Modern School aims to replace by life, the true interpreter of education.

A new day is dawning when the school will serve life in all its phases and reverently lift each human child to its appropriate place in a common life of beneficent social efficiency, whose motto will be not uniformity and discipline but freedom, expansion, good will, and joy for each and all.

### *Sex Education*

An educational system which refuses to see in the young budding and sprouting personality independence of mind and wholesomeness of a freely developed body will certainly not admit the necessity of recognizing the phase of sex in the child. Children and adolescent people have their young dreams, their vague forebodings of the sexual urge. The senses open slowly like the petals of a bud, the approaching sex maturity enhances the sensibilities and intensifies the emotions. New vistas, fantastic pictures, colorful adventures follow one another in swift procession before the sex-awakened child. It is conceded by all sex psychologists that adolescence is the most sensitive and susceptible period for unusual fanciful and poetic impressions. The radiance of youth--alas, of so brief duration--is inseparably bound up with the awakening of eroticism. It is the period when ideas and ideals, aims and motives, begin to fashion themselves in the human breast; that which is ugly and mean in life still remains covered with a fantastic veil, because the age which marks the change from child to youth is indeed the most exquisitely poetic and magical phase in all human existence.

Puritans and moralists leave nothing undone to mar and besmirch this magic time. The child may not know his own personality, much less be conscious of its sex force. Puritans build a high wall around this great human fact; not a ray of light is permitted to penetrate through the conspiracy of silence. To keep the child in all matters of sex in dense ignorance is considered by educators as a sort of moral duty. Sexual manifestations are treated as if they were tendencies to crime, yet puritans and moralists more than anyone else know from personal experience that sex is a tremendous factor. Nevertheless, they continue to banish everything that might relieve the harassed mind and soul of the child, that might free him from fear and anxiety.

The same educators also know the evil and sinister results of ignorance in sex matters. Yet, they have neither understanding nor humanity enough to break down the wall which puritanism has built around sex. They are like parents who, having been maltreated in their childhood, now ill-treat and torture their children to avenge themselves upon their own childhood. In their youth the parents and educators had it dinned into their ears that sex is low, unclean, and loathsome. Therefore, they straightway proceed to din the same things into their children.

It certainly requires independent judgment and great courage to free oneself from such impressions. The two-legged animals called parents lack both. Hence, they make their children pay for the outrage perpetrated upon them by their parents--which only goes to prove that it takes centuries of enlightenment to undo the harm wrought by traditions and habits. According to these traditions, "innocence" has become synonymous with "ignorance"; ignorance is indeed considered the highest virtue, and represents the "triumph?" of puritanism. But in reality, these traditions represent the crimes of puritanism, and have resulted in irreparable internal and external suffering to the child and youth.

It is essential that we realize once and for all that man is much more of a sex creature than a moral creature. The former is inherent, the other is grafted on. Whenever the dull moral demand conflicts with the sexual urge, the latter invariably conquers. But how? In secrecy, in lying and cheating, in fear and nerve-racking anxiety. Verily, not in the sexual tendency lies filth, but in the minds and hearts of the Pharisees: they pollute even the innocent, delicate manifestations in the life of the child. One often observes groups of children together, whispering, telling one another the legend of the stork. They have overheard something, they know it is a terrible thing, prohibited on

pain of punishment to talk about in the open, and the moment the little ones spy one of their elders they fly apart like criminals caught in the act. How shamed they would feel if their conversation were overheard and how terrible it would be to be classed among the bad and the wicked.

These are the children who eventually are driven into the gutter because their parents and teachers consider every intelligent discussion of sex as utterly impossible and immoral. These little ones must seek for their enlightenment in other places, and though their store of natural science is only somewhat true, yet it is really wholesomer than the sham virtue of the grown-ups who stamp the natural sex symptoms in the child as a crime and a vice.

In their studies the young often come upon the glorification of love. They learn that love is the very foundation of religion, of duty, of virtue and other such wonderful things. On the other hand, love is made to appear as a loathsome caricature because of the element of sex. The rearing, then, of both sexes in truth and simplicity would help much to ameliorate this confusion. If in childhood both man and woman were taught a beautiful comradeship, it would neutralize the oversexed condition of both and would help woman's emancipation much more than all the laws upon the statute books and her right to vote.

Most moralists and many pedagogues still adhere to the antiquated notion that man and woman belong to two different species, moving in opposite directions, and hence, must be kept apart. Love, which should be the impetus for the harmonious blending of two beings, today drives the two apart as a result of the moral flagellation of the young into an overwrought, starved, unhealthy sexual embrace. This kind of satisfaction invariably leaves behind a bad taste and "bad conscience."

The advocates of puritanism, of morality, of the present system of education, only succeed in making life smaller, meaner, and more contemptible--and what fine personalities can tolerate such an outrage? It is therefore a human proposition to exterminate the system and all those who are engaged in so-called education. The best education of the child is to leave it alone and bring to it understanding and sympathy.

**Footnotes:**

\* Editor's Note: George Eliot lived for many years with George Henry Lewes, and was ostracized for this relationship.

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