

Young children—young *ghetto* children—reading and discussing Shakespeare and Thoreau? That's what viewers of *60 Minutes* saw, and responded to with an outpouring of praise and wonderment, last year when the TV cameras paid a visit to Chicago's Westside Preparatory School and one Marva Collins, founder and sole teacher of the school. The sight of this woman eagerly, enthusiastically, and firmly demanding participation from her pupils was almost disproportionately moving.

While it should have been no surprise, Collins's proof that most children indeed do want to learn stands in sharp contrast to the blasé, hopeless attitude that prevails in public education today, evident both in the teachers and the students. In fact, textbooks for public school use today are written for levels *two years* below the grade in which they will be used, and, despite the fact that Scholastic Aptitude Test scores have declined and that the number of students scoring in upper brackets has fallen by 40 percent, grade point averages in public schools have gone *up* from 2.59 to 2.85 in the last decade.

Almost no one is willing to deny that something is very wrong with American government education. Nor is the problem confined to hard figures. "Creationists" and "evolutionists" are squaring off in many communities. Liberal parents bemoan the schools' probusiness bias; conservatives complain about leftist indoctrination. Some parents want their children to receive sex education or to attend integrated schools; others do not. Some parents are scared witless by the possibility that their children might have a homosexual teacher; others are unconcerned.

Obviously, since these desires and preferences are in conflict, everybody cannot be satisfied—not in a tax-supported, government-controlled educational system. Since everyone pays the bills, via taxes, government must attempt to provide a universally palatable system. The product satisfies some parents some of the time and no parents all of the time—a typical democratic result.

But why is education subjected to democratic decision making in the first place? Why is it tax-supported and government-controlled? There must be

some reasons why people who are dissatisfied with the product still cling to the system itself. Of course there are some reasons. In favor of tax support, the ideas of market failure and external benefits are invoked; and in favor of government control, parental irresponsibility and social survival. Given the serious problems with education today, we ought to take a good look at these reasons for believing that government should be in the business of providing schooling.

RIGHT REASONING

When a vitally needed good cannot be supplied through the operation of the free market, economists say that there is "market failure." If this occurs, then it is usually held that government must step in to supply the needed good. National defense is frequently cited as one such good, and advocates of tax-supported schooling maintain that education is the same sort of thing.

In outline, the argument goes like this:

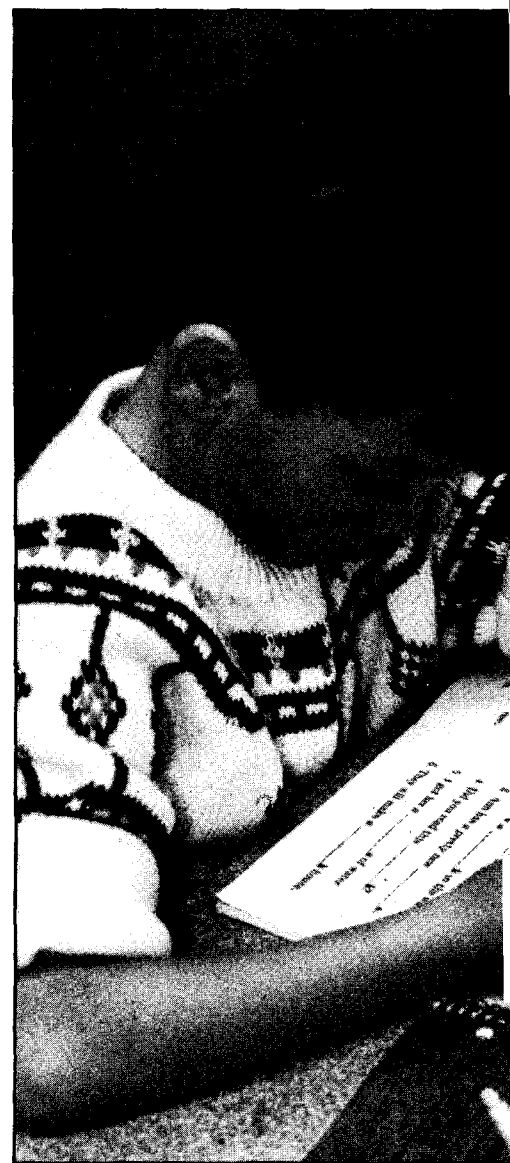
1. Everyone has a right to an education.
2. Private enterprise, through the operation of the free market, cannot provide everyone with an education.
3. But everyone *must* be provided with an education, since it is theirs by right (1).
4. Therefore, education must be provided by the government at taxpayer expense.

Take a close look at this argument, however, and you'll notice that both of the first two premises are ambiguous: interpreted one way they are false but support the conclusion; interpreted another way they are true but do *not* support the conclusion. The argument seems persuasive only if these premises are accepted as true with one meaning and then unconsciously *used* with an entirely different meaning.

The ambiguity in the first premise—that everyone has a *right* to an education—revolves around the fact that there are different kinds of rights: *natural*, or human, rights and *contractual* rights. We possess natural rights simply in virtue of our nature as human beings, without us or anyone else having to do anything to obtain them. Basically, we have a natural right to do whatever we wish as long as we refrain from committing acts of force

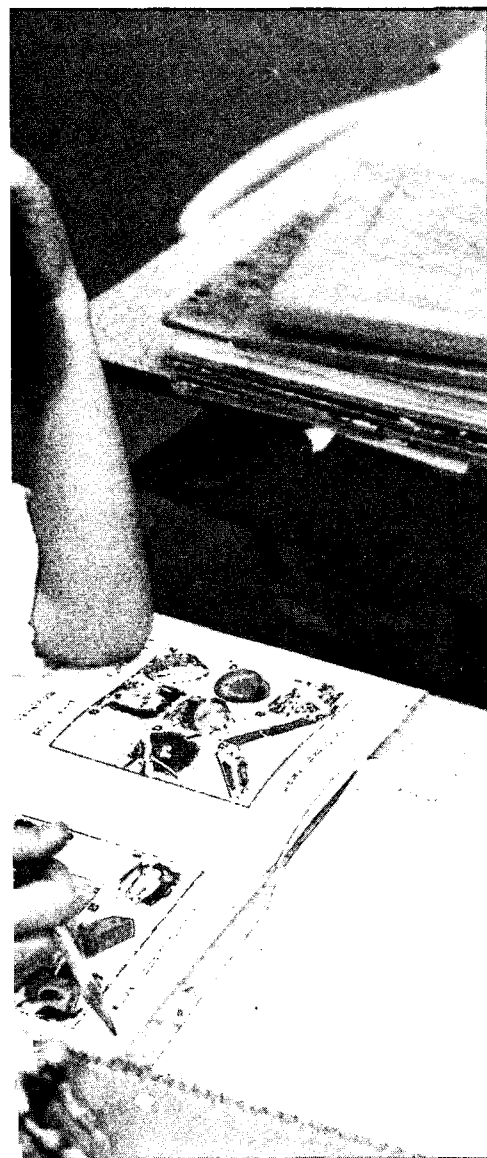
How Good Are for Public

By Scott



The Arguments Education?

Palmer



or fraud against others.

But this right is simply a moral claim on freedom of action. It means that if I want to go out and buy a loaf of bread my neighbor cannot legitimately use force to stop me from doing it. It does *not* mean that he must buy it for me or that the baker must sell me a loaf of bread whether or not he wishes to do so.

A contractual right, on the other hand, may very well require that someone else do something for me. Such a right, however, is not mine by nature but depends on another person's having explicitly or implicitly promised to do something for me.

Suppose that I make an agreement with my neighbor that I will fix his car in exchange for a loaf of bread. If I then fix his car, I have, in virtue of our agreement, a *contractual* right to get a loaf of bread at his expense. But in the absence of such an agreement, my natural rights entitle me only to get bread at my *own* expense, not at anybody else's.

Armed with these distinctions, let's go back and take another look at the first premise. "Everyone has a right to an education" is true *if* we include the proviso, "*at his own expense* or, in the case of a child, *at the expense of his parents.*" Why do we need this proviso? First, everyone has a natural right to seek an education at his own expense, since this does not involve employing force or fraud against anyone. Second, a child has a contractual right to be educated at the expense of his parents, since by bringing him into the world they have voluntarily undertaken the duty of caring for him until he is old enough to care for himself. This duty includes providing him with a decent education so that he can make a good life for himself later on.

The cleaned-up version of the premise—everyone has a right to an education at his own expense or, in the case of a child, at the expense of his parents—does not support the conclusion that anyone's education should be financed by a levy on the long-suffering taxpayers. The only way to support that conclusion is to interpret the "right to an education" as a contractual right against everyone in the country. Interpreted in this way, however, the first premise is plainly false. Therefore, insofar as the premise is true, it does not support the conclusion that education should be tax-supported; and

insofar as it supports the conclusion that education should be tax-supported, it is not true.

UNMARKETABLE?

The second premise—that private enterprise cannot provide everyone with an education—faces similar problems. It is true that private enterprise cannot (a) provide people with an education which they do not want, (b) provide people with an education financed out of the pockets of unwilling contributors, since private enterprise does not have the power of taxation, or (c) compel everyone to purchase the type of education that a few people (or even the majority) think they ought to have. But this is a far cry from not being able to provide people with an education! Private enterprise can certainly provide whatever type of education people are willing to pay for; and this, surely, is the relevant consideration.

The thing that might keep us from turning to a system in which people get the education they pay for is our concern for the poor. Wouldn't they be left out in the cold by a private system, unable to afford any education? Since it is typically in tax-supported areas like education that the poor fare the worst, it is hard to imagine that they would not be better off under a private system. As David Friedman wryly points out in his book *The Machinery of Freedom*, there are more good cars in the ghetto than good schools. But the most pointed response to this objection was made in the June 1963 issue of the *Objectivist Newsletter* by Nathaniel Branden:

If, for many years, the government had undertaken to provide all the citizens with shoes, . . . and if someone were subsequently to propose that this field should be turned over to private enterprise, he would doubtless be told indignantly: "What! Do you want everyone except the rich to walk around barefoot?" But the shoe industry is doing its job with immeasurably greater competence than public education is doing its job.

So the first argument for government-provided education is seriously flawed. The claim that everyone has a right to taxpayer-supported education rests on mixing up two meanings of the term *right*, and the belief that the market

could not provide education underestimates the capacities of the market and of individuals, rich or poor, to make sound choices.

WHO SHOULD PAY?

There is another argument for government education, though, based on the idea of "external benefits." If when I perform a certain action I inadvertently benefit someone else, then that person is said to have received a benefit external to my action. For instance, suppose that one night I shoot a burglar in my living room. Word gets around and soon all the burglars in town are convinced that people on my street are too dangerous to steal from. All of my neighbors have "accidentally" benefited from my action. The question then is, Do they have to pay for my bullets? When it comes to education, the common belief is that people do have to (ought to) pay for receiving its external benefits.

The argument proceeds this way:

1. Every member of society benefits from the education of children.
2. If a person benefits from something, he should be forced to help pay for it.
3. There is no free-market mechanism for making sure that everyone who benefits from children's education pays his "fair share."
4. Therefore, education must be tax-supported, since otherwise some people would get a benefit without paying for it.

The first premise of this argument may be somewhat exaggerated, but its thrust is no doubt well-taken. It's with the second premise that the problems begin.

Consider: when I shot that burglar in my living room, there was probably a *slight* benefit to everyone in the country in terms of a reduced crime rate. Should *all* be forced therefore to make a contribution to my bank account? Of course not. But this just shows that the premise is absurd. In *Man, Economy, and State*, Murray Rothbard observes with characteristic penetration:

The difficulty with [the external benefits argument] is that it proves far too much. For which one of us would earn anything like our present real income were it not for the external benefits that we derive from the actions of others? Specifically, the great modern accumulation of capital goods is an inheritance from the net savings of our ancestors. Without these, we would, regardless of the quality of our moral character, be liv-

ing in a primitive jungle... And who then is to receive the loot? Our dead ancestors, who were our benefactors in investing the capital?

There is another peculiar result of the external benefits argument: anyone who is really worried about someone getting a benefit without paying for it should support a *private* school system, not a tax-supported one! It is only under a tax-supported system that single people and childless couples, for example, are forced to shoulder some of the cost of educating *other people's* children. Under a private system, the people who wanted to purchase education, for themselves or for someone else, would be required to pay for it. The external-benefits argument not only fails to prove that schools should be tax-supported; it proves the opposite!

It is true that private enterprise cannot provide people with an education financed out of the pockets of unwilling contributors.

At this point a defender of government education might respond: "Well, perhaps schools shouldn't be paid for out of tax money after all. But still, their curriculum and teaching methods ought to be controlled by the government, and attendance should be compulsory up to a certain age." This response does contain a grain of common-sense truth, but the arguments behind it are again misguided.

CONTROLLING CONCERNS

The common-sense truth is this: To bring a child into the world is to assume certain very important responsibilities—to feed, clothe, and otherwise care for the child until she is old enough to care for herself. Part of this parental responsibility is to prepare the child to look after herself by seeing to it that she receives an adequate education, including at least facility in the three Rs. Without these basic skills, a person has little chance for a decent life in modern society.

There is the possibility, however, that

parents will sometimes neglect this responsibility. If government-controlled compulsory schooling could ensure that children are trained in these basic skills, then that would be a point in its favor.

Unfortunately, the government's track record in this area is sorry indeed. The near-illiteracy of large numbers of high school graduates is a public scandal. When one thinks about the matter, however, it is not surprising at all. The government has no pressing motive to see that young people are well educated; and in certain areas, such as economics, it has a pressing motive to see that they remain ignorant.

Given that the government cannot guarantee for the majority the basic education that some parents might neglect to provide, wouldn't it be better to leave control of curriculum and school attendance to parents, who generally do take a personal interest in the welfare of their children? This is not, of course, a perfect answer to the possibility of parental irresponsibility, *but neither is the government-control alternative*. And at least it would allow increasingly desperate parents to have a say in their children's education.

The advocate of government control has, however, one last concern: the survival of society. Simply stated, this argument maintains that unless children are schooled in the cultural heritage of a society—its worldview, prevailing moral and political beliefs, and a cleaned-up version of its history—the society will become so fragmented as to disintegrate into chaos and civil war. Hence, it is argued that government must control the school curriculum to ensure that all children are guided into desirable ways of thinking.

There are two main problems with this argument. First, the way in which it is usually advanced reveals some disturbing totalitarian overtones. "Children are to be guided into desirable ways of thinking." Desired by whom? Why, desired by the government, of course, since the government controls the curriculum. And the temptation facing any government is to demand of its citizens unquestioning obedience and subservience to the State. As Isabel Paterson observed in *The God of the Machine*:

Every politically controlled educational system will inculcate the doctrine of state supremacy sooner or later, whether as the divine right of kings, or the "will

(Continued on p. 41.)

ARE BUSINESSES REALLY OPPOSED TO BIG GOVERNMENT?

By Russell Shannon

Does the business community love *laissez-faire*? The famous answer "It depends" applies all too well. The popular wisdom is that businesses would like nothing better than to be left alone by government and that this prompts their increasingly vociferous denunciations of environmental, energy, safety, and consumer regulations. OSHA and EPA, it would seem, are agents of the devil.

In fact, however, much government interference in the marketplace is inspired by business requests. Producers frequently seek tariffs, subsidies, licensing requirements, and so on to shore up their markets, boost their prices, or enhance their finances. If those who have been verbally stoning Chrysler were asked

who is without sin in this regard, few could raise their hands.

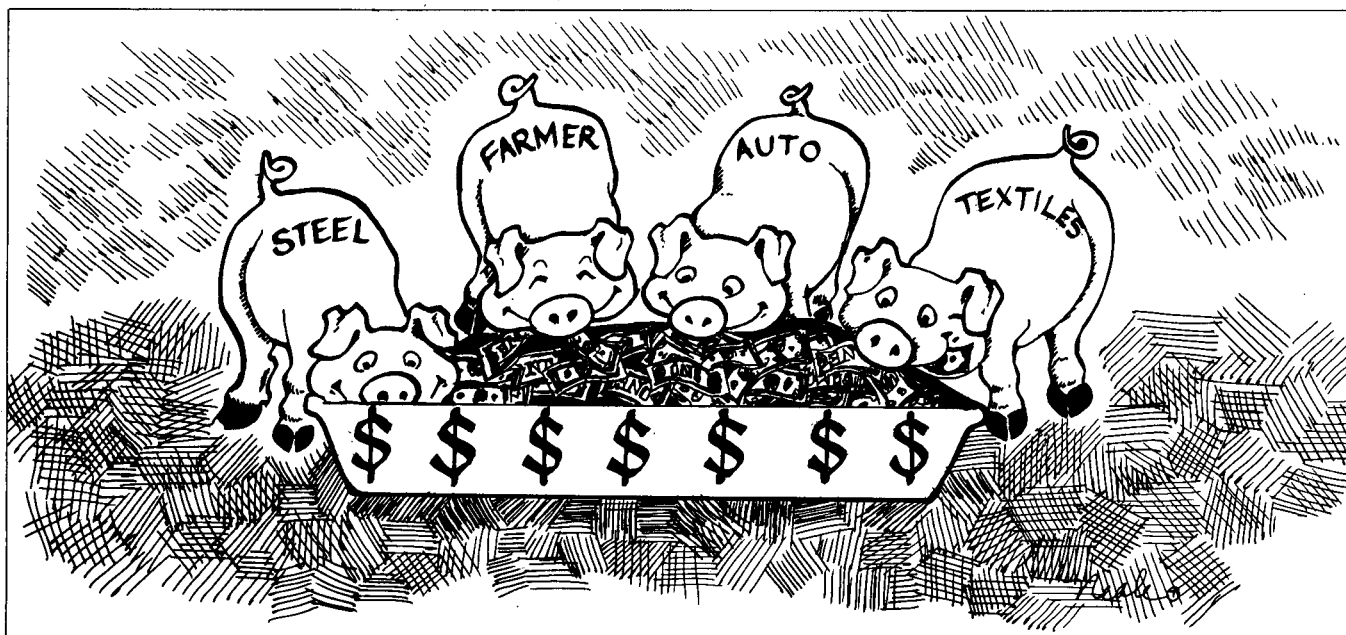
The American textile industry offers a clear case of the business community's ambivalence here. When it comes to regulation that will reduce industry profits—such as efforts by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to impose expensive requirements for reducing cotton dust in the workplace—the textile industry denounces government interference. Industry groups point out, quite accurately, that the proposed rules, by raising the cost of labor relative to the cost of machines, will surely reduce employment opportunities in the industry.

Yet those same groups ignore the side effects of government interference that

will *increase* industry profits. The textile industry has in the past frequently sought—and obtained—import quotas to provide relief from the competition of foreign fabrics. Quotas do, of course, cause some domestic employment opportunities to expand—but they also mean higher prices and fewer choices for consumers.

Although it would be difficult to argue that import quotas are ever a boon to the consumers of the controlled products, in other cases it is easier to make that claim. In fact, however, much legislation that has come to be seen as protective of consumers actually was introduced to benefit producers. A good example of this is meat inspection.

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Melissa Neale