

All Schooled Up

DESCHOOLING SOCIETY

by Ivan Illich

Harper & Row, 116 pp., \$5.95

Reviewed by Colin Greer

■ Ivan Illich's new book, *Deschooling Society*, provides a very useful short-hand statement-of-direction for a society that is "all schooled up," a nice handle around which to get a grip on the modern relationship between school and society.

As Illich himself spells it out, "The public is indoctrinated to believe that skills are valuable and reliable only if they are the result of formal schooling." Consequently, the schools have a monopoly on access to opportunity in society and the capitalist functions of scarcity and selectivity are served by the school; meritocracy, the ruling ethos of modern technological capitalism, is served by schools in the same way that the doctrine of divine right was served by the Church. Nowadays, the school—the major single vehicle of social selection—replaces other-worldly promises of the good life with immediate promises of social mobility and prosperity. At the same time, it helps to maintain the age-old incongruity between humane democratic rhetoric and monumental social inequality. Just as with formal religious authority before it, the school's monopoly on opportunity goes hand in hand with its oracle status, sustaining the rhetoric of its promises and the conventions of privileged estates by becoming the judge and jury for those wanting "in" on those promises, while rationalizing the exclusion of millions. Jumping from pre-industrial to con-

temporary analogies, Illich likens the public school structure to "the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is."

Everyone learns in school how America, from early in the life of the Republic, puts its schools at the heart of its democratic egalitarian promise. The very presence of public schools has become a testament to the glory of the American democratic genius.

Illich takes note of this commitment and its revolutionary origins, but since he makes quite different assumptions about the present, he draws rather different conclusions about the past. The symbol is the same, but the story line is of an entirely different order:

Two centuries ago the United States led the world in a movement to disestablish the monopoly of a single church. Now we need the constitutional disestablishment of the monopoly of the school, and thereby of a system which legally combines prejudice with discrimination. The first article of a bill of rights for a modern, humanist society would correspond to the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution: "The State shall make no law with respect to the establishment of education." There shall be no ritual obligatory for all.

Illich restates the radical critique and then takes it one step further. Schools monopolize opportunity, he tells us eloquently; they standardize norms and deny individual differences; they delay gratification and kill creativity ("Instruction smothers the horizon of their imagination," he says); they repress love and encourage fear; they teach alienation and competition; and they discourage sharing and cooperation. What Illich calls the "hidden curriculum," the process and content of schooling that successfully ensures that the "products" of the school "have been taught to substitute expectations for hope," diametrically opposes the humane, democratic rhetoric of schools and schoolmen. From elementary school to university, Illich argues, the school apparatus "has the effect of imposing consumer standards at work and at home."

But Illich goes further. Too many critics of public education have failed to understand the subservience of the school monopoly to the social order; rather, they believe, schools have lost

their way and can be redirected. "The free school movement," Illich points out, for example, "entices unconventional educators but ultimately does so in support of the conventional ideology of schooling." And so he believes that even many radical figures in the public debate about schools in this country are prisoners of a view of society that equates schooling with education. And to assume the necessity of schools is to assume the necessity of the world that creates them and other major public institutions. In this perspective, "the New World Church is the knowledge industry, both purveyor of opium and the workbench during an increasing number of years of an individual's life. Deschooling is, therefore, at the root of any movement for human liberation."

As Illich explains it, "Equal educational opportunity is, indeed, both a desirable and a feasible goal, but to equate this with obligatory schooling is to confuse salvation with the Church." The critical principle of educational reform is to return "initiative and accountability for learning to the learner or his most immediate tutor."

Unfortunately, when it comes to his vision of the future, Illich is by no means as cogent. He does present the reader with some guidelines for reform practices, but he does not explore the possibility of making those practices represent radical structural changes or take into account the fact that some men are satisfied by the promissory and competitive ethos of the public schools. Of course, for Illich an ideal educational system "should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives," and technology, he points out, can be a liberating educational method. What he refers to as "skill exchanges," "peer matching," and "reference services"—all designed to make teachers accountable, learners autonomous, and every man a learning resource—should certainly supplement formalized universal access to accredited resources in order to break down exclusionary credentialing patterns and the objectification of persons through teacher/pupil roles.

And yet, reasonable and useful though these guidelines are, the danger of co-optation by the system he opposes, rather than the radical advance he seeks, is as close for Illich as for all the so-called "romantic critics" of schooling. With no theoretical vision of man, no new understanding of man's relationship to the institutions he creates, Illich's reforms can be made to serve the easy commitment to change of more system-oriented reformers. The major purpose of the system is to survive, and reform based on criticisms of current practice

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usually turns out to be merely a means of survival. Of course, there is a world of difference between Illich and such rationalizers of the system as Charles Silberman, who adopt popular clichés of dissatisfaction in the facile expectation that institutional goals and their outcomes can be changed simply by restating these objectives and what they are intended to achieve. The language of Illich's radical criticism has been easily adapted to the rhetorical platform of those who have constantly diverted our attention from the fact that there is almost no relationship between stated goals and real results.

Illich, aware of this disparity, understands that it is time to look at results in order to get some true notion of what the real—albeit implicit—goals are. But he is not sufficiently aware, at least not in *Deschooling Society*, of the ways in which such critiques as his can serve the system if they ignore the question of why man has created such an institutional structure and what it would really take to change it. There is no historical precedent in the annals of reform to justify hope in the clarion call of criticism and change. Rather, such calls presage future demands by the body politic, and provide the system with guidelines for reforming itself from the inside—so that it can continue business as usual.

The procedures for institutional reform that Illich suggests all add up to a vision of changed institutions, rather than an assessment of how we can—step by step—get from where we are to where he envisions us. The only time he looks at men from the point of view of present world strategy is in his reference to Paulo Freire's educational/political work with Brazilian peasants—at once raising consciousness about their political and economic exploitation and teaching them to read by making political ideology and economic reality the substantive base for literacy training. The only time Illich looks at men from a theoretical frame of reference that is broader than the cogent but limited school/society complex, he identifies it in terms of the tyranny of technological method and the increasing objectification of man since the victory of what he called Prometheus (consumer ethos, planned man-made environments) over Epimetheus (hope, love, and joy). The answer: "While we can specify that the alternative to scholastic funnels is a world made transparent by the communications webs, and while we can specify very concretely how these could function, we can only expect the Epimethean nature of man to re-emerge; we neither plan nor produce it."

Illich somehow expects the appropriate transformation simply because

he senses—as many of us do—the urging of our moral and cultural breakdowns today. Something has to give, and fast. Now is the time to go one way or the other—humane progress or human holocaust—and Illich has faith in the former. "The mood of 1971 is propitious for a major change of direction in search of a hopeful future."

I am hopeful for the future too, and I believe that we have to make serious choices now. But I am concerned that we won't make the right choices unless we demand greater depth in our social analyses of and recommendations for the institutions we depend on to maintain or remake society.

That schools will change to accommodate new demands is really not in doubt. What is in doubt is whether enough contemporary men will be prepared to respond to new demands in radically new ways. My fear is not that man is dying, but that we will once again miss the opportunity to edit the social script differently. Now, more than ever, we need to examine carefully the relationship of established institutions and the men inside and outside of them to the particular characteristics that make the present unique.

Deschooling in Illich's sense means disestablishing the state, but nowhere is there an analysis of existing theories or the presentation of new formulations of why man has created existing forms of social organization. Without such insight we cannot hope to do more than continue to replicate the bloodiness of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary preening and prancing. Within the wide contours Illich considers essential to an understanding of the role of schools in society, it is dangerous to fall back for solutions on the same kinds of narrow school analyses school people have made for years now; however, instead of reforming them with more money, more personnel, more time, the call here is just as simply and just as narrowly to destroy them—as though somehow schools really were the cause of as well as an effect and an agency of the contemporary social order.

Clearly, Illich is one of the "hopeful brothers and sisters" he would call Epimethean men, who presently represent our best hopes for the future. But human history does not speak highly of the achievement of those marvelous men to date.

Colin Greer is senior editor of Social Policy and director of the University Without Walls at Staten Island Community College. His book *The Great School Legend: A Revisionist Interpretation of American Public Education* will be published by Basic Books.

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TIME'S CHILDREN: IMPRESSIONS OF YOUTH

by Thomas J. Cottle

Little, Brown and Company,
384 pp., \$7.95

Reviewed by Landon Y. Jones, Jr.

■ Thomas Cottle is a young sociologist who has spent the past several years working and talking with young people and writing down what they've told him. He is a sensitive listener, and his first book, *Time's Children*, is an extraordinary collection of a dozen essays on a subject that has recently been written into exhaustion.

Everyone who has lived through it knows that the landscape of adolescence is a dark and troubling place, full of twisting paths and uncharted wilderness. Yet, many of our growing numbers of writers on youth have roamed at will through kidland, mapping every variety of youth behavior according to their own theories. Too often, they leave us not with an understanding of what it is like to be young but rather with what the old want the young to be. Like all-too-perfect mirrors, the "kids" reflect our own biases.

How unusual and refreshing it is, then, to find that a writer has assembled an entire book on young people without once (that I can discover) using the words "idealistic" or "hypocritical." This is no small feat at a time when writers have been daily choosing up sides over the question of whether we should be hopeful or despairing about the future the kids offer us.

Unlike many writers on youth, Cottle is willing to accept the terrible ambivalences of the young: the anger and the compassion, the hate and the love, the reverence for the parent and the impulse to kill him. These are contradictions that hardly need to be impressed upon us. One remembers Ted Gold, less than a month before he would blow himself up in a New York City townhouse, joking with a friend that "I think I'll have to wait for Willie Mays to retire before I become a good Communist." Or, in Cottle's own example, there are the disillusioned "McCarthy kids," finished with politics, suddenly finding themselves transfixed before the television, "hundreds of them on their knees, exhausted, begging for California, Ohio, Illinois, and Missouri to 'come home to Humphrey.'"

This is not to suggest that *Time's Children* is about something called "campus unrest." Rather, it is Cottle's personal and often passionately written account of his explorations (he calls them "impressions") in the world of the young. He builds with two street

children an imaginary "moonshot" far more real to them than the one on television. He creates with nine adolescents a family of understanding in what would now be called a "T-group." He witnesses suburban high schools cracking under the strains of racial and community tensions and—the contrast is striking—watches urban college students trying out on slum children their own ideas of reform and revolution.

There is a remarkable study of a fifteen-year-old girl who, despite (or is it because of) the inevitable "You knows" and "I means," throws into question all our ideas of what it means to be young:

"But if I got killed, you know, my parents and my friends would be all shook up, but who would come? If I were young, it'd make the papers and all that, especially if I got raped or murdered or something. But, well, you know. Hey, I've got a question for you. Just for once. If I got killed. I mean. Really. Listen. If I got killed, what would you do? Would you feel sad?"

Another kind of anxiety surfaces on "College and Career Night in Bristol Township." The working-class parents have led their children to the new high school for an annual rite of passage: the acquisition of college admission forms. But first they must hear from an obsequious college representative:

"You know, years ago a high school education was sufficient. But no more. Now you must have at least a college degree and, pretty soon, if you really want to stay ahead of the game, a master's and Ph.D. degree as well. You know that people with college degrees live so much better; they travel so much. The other day I spoke to a man who had just come back from Rome. Think of that; he had been to Rome for only one week!"

The parents nod their heads, wondering if they will be able to secure loans for tuition. People with college degrees live so much better. All the scene lacks is a Frederick Wiseman in the corner taking it all down on film.

There is a temptation to label Cottle's insistence on the ambiguities of the young as something of a cop-out itself. He is harsh with the parents who place the "Come back home—all is forgiven" notices in underground newspapers ("a testament to what must be seen by the young as a crumbling structure or

a tragic reversal of intentionality and interpersonal competence . . . a far worse social fact than 'hippie' farm colonies or pot parties"). A father confesses an extramarital affair to his devastated thirteen-year-old daughter. Student radicals mouth the conventional clichés about their understanding parents. ("I would have felt better if my father had opposed me right out. His siding with me only confused me more.")

One point where Cottle does lurch into excessive sentiment is in a discussion of what he calls the "special Harvard months" of 1969. Actually, it was a rather ordinary student uprising, distinguished primarily by the cosmic significance attributed to it and by the arrogance of nearly everyone involved. To Cottle, however, students released from jail seem "so active, so pure" and "were in fact like the soldiers back from some inexplicable and foreign war, and the people waiting behind, at home, equally brave, were saying, as best they could, be proud of your tears and your efforts."

In another context, he rightly observes that such fulsome sympathy usually embarrasses the students more than anything else. But then comes an intriguing passage: Cottle is one of the few writers who has talked to the police after one of their notorious "busts." He found them surprisingly sympathetic people who "hated anarchists, resented rich kids, but not as much as violence." The police are confused by what they have had to do, and Cottle is candid enough to say that he, too, is confused by the "forthrightness and sweet gentleness" he finds in them.

All of this emphasizes that the difficulty with speaking or writing about youth, as Cottle points out, is that it necessarily involves a confrontation with one's own past. It is as if one hopes that the decision of whether or not to side with the young promises acceptance by them and therefore grants re-entrance into a time we have forever lost. The point, of course, is that the young are "time's children," and we cannot hope to join them. Rather, we must learn to make room for their cruel ambivalences.

At one point, a Harvard student muses: "We're right at the center of everything. You remember when you're a child, and your older brother is the big star, or your big sister is doing all the things? Now it's us, we're right in the center, reading about ourselves in the newspaper. It's youth. Everything is youth and us."

One can only hope that he will find an easy passage into the land of the old.

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