Education for Liberation

by ROBERT MACKIE

Education is always a political event .... education is never neutral, educators are all politicians. Thus there can be no talk of education without talk of power, without talk of economic and political power.

- Paulo Freire.

The basis of this article is twofold: to provide a survey of three interlocking currents in contemporary radical education; and to indicate the nature of practical political activity in which Australian radicals are currently involved. With the forces of political and educational reaction demonstrably on the march, the need for revolutionary action has never been more evident.

IVAN ILLICH: THE ATTACK ON SCHOOLS

For most teachers, students and academics, serious questioning of the accepted norms for schooling was begun by Ivan Illich. In his attack on a wide variety of social institutions, Illich has been principally concerned with humanity’s lack of autonomy. This is nowhere more evident than in the process of compulsory schooling, by which society perpetuates and transmits its myths and ideologies. Illich contends that the school processes people so they may more readily consume institutionally defined products. In this way, schools become manipulative institutions which proscribe and foreclose opportunities for students and teachers to meet their own needs. Against the prevailing notion of society organised along industrial and bureaucratic lines, Illich posits, in Alternatives to Schooling (1972), a concept of conviviality. He writes -

I choose the term conviviality to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. I intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment, and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment. I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realised in personal inter-dependence, and as such, an intrinsic ethical value. (P. 50)

While Ivan Illich is best known for his Deschooling Society (1971) it would be misleading to see this merely as a book about schools. In by-passing a plethora of reformers who still put their faith in the perfectibility of institutions, Illich argues for the disestablishment of any and all social structures which frustrate conviviality. Modern societies, according to Illich, by conflating the distinction between education
and schooling, not only devalue learning undertaken on one's own behalf, but also facilitate the school's monopolisation of education funds and resources.

Illich's trenchant critique of social institutions has aroused widespread debate. Yet it has also been subjected to a radical marxist evaluation. Herbert Gintis in the *Harvard Educational Review* (Feb. 1972) accepts that Illich's description of modern society is pertinent, but suggests his analysis is simplistic. Gintis charges Illich with not going nearly far enough. Deschooling Society is a diversion from the complex political, organisational, intellectual and personal demands of revolutionary reconstruction in education. It is crucial, Gintis writes, that educators and students who have been attracted to Illich by their own frustration and disillusionment, move beyond him.

Central to Gintis' attack on Illich is the latter's neglect of the political economy of education. For Illich, the source of social decay is located in the manipulative behavior of corporate bureaucracies. Gintis, by contrast, argues that the normal operation of basic capitalist economic institutions are to blame. These consistently sacrifice healthy community development, work, environment, education and social equality to the accumulation of capital and the pursuit of profit. Furthermore, the deleterious social outcomes of capitalist production are quite independent of the values and preferences of individuals. They are certainly in no sense a reflection of the autonomous wills of manipulating bureaucrats. Thus, by merely ending manipulation and endorsing conviviality, Illich has ignored the structure and functioning of economic institutions under capitalism. In rejecting schools, Gintis concludes, Illich embraces a commodity fetishist ideal in education, and in rejecting political action he affirms a utilitarian, individualistic conception of humanity. Since Illich's analysis fails to pass beyond the given, it offers little hope for radical educational change.

**PAULO FREIRE: EDUCATION FOR LIBERATION**

Far more radical, both in theory and practice, has been the work of exiled Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. After the rightwing coup in 1964, Freire was arrested, jailed, and deported for the allegedly subversive nature of his work in promoting adult literacy. As he later remarked, "education for liberation is not the subject for a picnic; one can't expect the ruling class to send you on holiday to a tropical island".

Freire's concern with developing a liberating pedagogy for the oppressed in the Third World has led him to assert that education is always a political event. Echoing sentiments in Marx's *German Ideology*, Freire writes, "in a class society, the power elite necessarily determine what education will be and therefore its objectives". To achieve through education a humane transformation of the world, Freire advocates a form of revolutionary praxis: that is, action and critical reflection on the world in order to change it. For him this involves a concept of man as a knowing subject who strives to achieve an ever-deepening awareness of the socio-cultural and historical reality which shapes his life. From this awareness develops a capacity to know and transform that reality, along with a commitment to such a transformation. To put it in Freire's own words -

... to change hearts without changing the structures which prevent good hearts is insane. Consciousness can't be changed through sermons or seminars. It can only occur when we are committed, engaged in a real programme of praxis, of action and reflection.

(Thinking with Paulo Freire)

**TOWARDS A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF EDUCATION: SAM BOWLES AND HERB GINTIS**

The third contributing theme to contemporary education emanates from the research of political economists Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis whose recently published book *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) is reviewed elsewhere in this issue. Their work is strongly critical of the failure of education to promote economic equality in capitalist societies. The reason for this is that the school system mirrors the inherently unequal structure of capitalism. Until this structure is abandoned and replaced by a more democratic and egalitarian system, our schools, colleges and universities will serve as
mere tools for reinforcing an authoritarian system, rather than as a means for transforming it.

Possibly the most dramatic finding by Bowles and Gintis is the statistically verifiable congruence between the personality traits conducive to proper job performance and those which are rewarded with high grades in the classroom. At the bottom of the occupational hierarchy workers have to be subordinate, docile, punctual and conform to external authority. If workers occupy positions higher up the employment hierarchy then the more valued traits are self-control, flexibility and the capacity to make decisions. Bowles and Gintis have found that schools reproduce different types of personality and behavior in different social groups, thereby reproducing social stratification and inequality. Thus it is otiose for devotees of progressive education, deschooling and open classrooms to expect such reforms to affect the basic structure of society. Educational change must be consonant with changes in the workplace; when factories and offices are changed from hierarchical, alienating structures into democratically run, egalitarian institutions, then schools will function as agencies for promoting equal opportunity for all. The school alone can never be an agent for equality in a fundamentally unequal society.

Bowles and Gintis are optimistic about the possibility of revolutionary political and educational change for several reasons. Firstly, they suggest the capitalist economy can continue to meet people's material needs only at the price of denying their needs for personal security, and more integral, self-initiated work and social life. Secondly, private property and hierarchical organisation will become less prevalent as participatory control by workers is found to be a more productive form of organisation. Finally, social problems are increasingly politicised through the extension of the role of government in society. Education is a prime example. Bowles and Gintis contend that when people understand the political origins of social and economic distress, they will come to sense the possibility of a political solution to these problems.
WHAT TO DO ABOUT SCHOOLS?

In June of this year, Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis visited Australia for two related conferences. The first, at Sydney University, was devoted to political economy, and the second at NSW Teachers' Federation Auditorium, concerned what to do about schools. This latter gathering attracted seven hundred students, teachers, academics and parents for a two-day examination of marxist perspectives on education.

In addition to the stimulating contributions made by Bowles and Gintis, other speakers at the conference emphasised the theme of radical political, economic and educational change in Australia. Peter Stevens from Sydney University, highlighted the inevitably political nature of the schooling process as an ideological prop for capitalism.

Rachel Sharpe argued that free schools and progressive schools were not genuine alternatives since they produce the same outcomes as conventional schools although utilising different means. In essence, she felt progressive schools were bourgeois middle-class establishments devoted to the pursuit of a reactionary individualism. By drawing from the state system both parents and children who are dissatisfied, that system remains fundamentally untouched and secure.

Other major speakers included Brian Abbey and Dean Ashenden, political scientists from Adelaide, who provided a marxist analysis of the South Australian education system. This centred on the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Wilcox family's refusal to conform to the reactionary and irrational demands of the Director-General, headmaster and teachers at their child's school. Abbey and Ashenden amply demonstrated that education in South Australia denied democratic participation and criticism from either parents or students.

RADICAL EDUCATION GROUP ("RED G")

Stemming from the conference "What to do about Schools" has been the formation of a nationwide Radical Education Group (RED G), based in Sydney. The impetus of this group is primarily to promote a socialist analysis of schooling in capitalist society. Furthermore, RED G seeks to develop educational structures and materials which will facilitate both a critique of capitalism and the transition to socialism in Australia. Where necessary, RED G will actively intervene in educational institutions to defend and extend changes which transfer control into the hands of teachers and students. Although RED G is barely three months old, it has branches in each Australian State. Readers of Australian Left Review are strongly urged to become involved in this activity by contacting one of the organisers listed below.

RED G has also encouraged the establishment of study groups whose task is to develop an understanding of marxist theory in relation to education. In addition, RED G already publishes a regular news bulletin and will shortly bring out its own magazine, Radical Education Dossier (RED), three times a year.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to indicate both the theoretical rationale behind moves for radical educational change, and the practical measures taken to implement a political economy of education. Contemporary activists in education are in strong agreement with Marx's thesis on Feuerbach - that previous educators have merely interpreted the world, when the point, however, is to change it.

REFERENCES:

7. Radical Education Group (RED G), C/- Peter Stevens, 29b, Avenue Road, Glebe, 2037. Phone 660-4032.
8. Radical Education Dossier (RED), C/- Robert Mackie, 10 Reuss Street, Glebe, 2037. Phone 660-0874.