

Public Education: Who is it for?

By

Jordan Reel  
Joseph A. Butt, S.J. College of Business  
Loyola University New Orleans  
6363 St. Charles Avenue  
New Orleans, LA 70118  
jtreel@loyno.edu

and

Walter E. Block, Ph.D.  
Harold E. Wirth Eminent Scholar Endowed Chair and Professor of Economics  
Joseph A. Butt, S.J. College of Business  
Loyola University New Orleans  
6363 St. Charles Avenue, Box 15, Miller Hall 318  
New Orleans, LA 70118  
tel: (504) 864-7934  
fax: (504) 864-7970  
wblock@loyno.edu  
<http://www.walterblock.com/>

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to explain the effects of statist education on class structure. First, the origin of American education is traced back to the Hindu caste system where schools were used to indoctrinate the lower castes. The Hindu influence on American education is explored, showing that it became popular in the United States as a way to acculturate Catholic immigrants in the 19th century and indoctrinate students with state propaganda in the progressive era. An economic analysis of education shows that government funding of education increases the costs that students must pay to signal productivity levels to employers. Our conclusion is that statist education uses coercion to enforce the distinction between the ruling class and the ruled. In the free society this coercion would be eliminated, allowing for a free-market in education which to reduce costs on students.

Key words:

Education; public schools; castes

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### I. Introduction

There is a clear disparity between the achievement of students in poor public school districts, middle class districts, and private institutions.<sup>1</sup> Kozol (36-45) believes that this achievement gap is the result of not enough funding for the poor. However, increases in education spending over the last 20 years show little improvement and private schools operate at half the cost of public ones while showing better results (Anderson, McLellan, Overton, and Wolfram 3). Experiments in charter and voucher programs show that cultural differences are not the cause; students of all backgrounds excel in charter and private schools. The problem with education is not one of its management or funding but of government. The outcomes of American education are not surprising when considering its foundation.

One of the greatest sacred cows in modern society is public education. Anyone who casts aspersions on this venerable institution will be severely criticized by the guardians of political correctness. The present paper, however, does just that. In section II we trace the beginnings of statist education back to, of all things, the Indian caste system, which certainly enjoys no great or warm support in the modern day. With clay feet like this exposed, we move in section III where we see the beginnings of English and American public schools in just this source. The burden of section IV is to view the confrontation between Protestants and Catholics on this issue. Section V is devoted to an analysis of how elitism impacts education. In section VI we discuss solutions to these challenges. In section VII we explore, and then refute, dirigisme arguments for public or statist education. We conclude in section VIII.

### II. The Caste system

The origin of American public education lays in the Brahmanic indoctrination of the poor castes. The Brahmin are Hindu priests who were the masters in the Indian caste system. They created a social structure where the menial and "untouchable" castes, 95% of the population, were subject to the priests, government, and merchant castes (Gatto 39). To control the masses and prevent them from taking over, the Brahmins created free education for the two lower castes. The pedagogical techniques used by these people are known as the Madras system.

This system enforced the subordination of lower castes to their rulers in two ways. First, because it was created by and funded by the ruling classes, the Brahmin controlled the material that was taught. Emphasis in these schools was placed on knowing the "truth" which included acknowledging the superiority of the ruling castes over the students who were its subjects. Second, the Madras system effectively abolished free-thought in its students by keeping

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<sup>1</sup> *Findings in Brief: Reading and Mathematics 2011*, pp. 10-11. The National Assessment of Education shows the disparity in math and reading between students who are eligible for free lunches, and those that are not. In mathematics, students eligible for free lunches scored 228 out of 500 while those that did not scored 252. In reading, the former registered -206 while the latter attained 235.

them busy all of the time with repetitive tasks of little educational value. Students were turned into thoughtless followers of their superiors. To anyone who has ever suffered through the U.S. public school system, this will sound all too familiar.

An Anglican Chaplain, Andrew Bell, realized the impact of the Hindu schools when he observed them in the 1790's:

“In every instance under my observation in this kingdom, and in every report with which my brethren have honoured me of the effects produced by the Madras System in their parishes, the improvement in the subordination, orderly conduct, and general behaviour of the children, has been particularly noticed, and must be regarded as infinitely the most valuable feature of it's character (Bell 10).”

Bell saw how this system turned children into passive and loyal subjects. It was adapted by Bell to raise poor children to be loyal subjects of the Anglican Church.

### III. English and American public schools

Bell's version of the Madras system was first used in the west at the Aldgate Charity School in England, 1797. "Its ultimate object, the ultimate object or end of all education, is to make good scholars, good men, good subjects, and good Christians (Bell 7)."

This educational philosophy was made popular in the west by a Quaker named Joseph Lancaster. He read Bell's notes on the Indian schools and saw it as a way to cheaply educate poor children. Lancaster opened his own academy in London that attracted thousands of poverty stricken students with free tuition. They were so successful they attracted the attention of royalty (Gatto 41). King George III began funding Lancaster's schools under the condition that all students be taught the bible (Gatto 41). Lancaster's methods of teaching differed from Bell's in that they were created with the intention of empowering students instead of subjugating them. In 1807 Bell contested Lancaster's use of the Hindu methods of education (Gatto 41). With the support of the Anglican Church, Bell's schools took the place of Lancaster's. However Lancaster's name was still used to describe the English version of the Madras system (Gatto 42).

Lancaster schools and similar education methods made their way to America in the late 18th and 19th centuries amid fear that immigrants with "criminal" non-Anglican values and foreign tongues would destroy the newly formed republic. In England and India, statist schools were used to teach the lower classes their place in society, but in America they were promoted as a tool for the acculturation of immigrants and homogenization of society. Thomas Jefferson wrote about his fears of European immigrants during the American revolution:

“It is the composition of the freest principles of the English constitution, with others derived from natural right and natural reason. To these nothing can be more opposed than the maxims of absolute monarchies. Yet from such we are to expect the greatest number of emigrants. They will bring with them the principles of the governments they leave, imbibed in

their early youth; or if able to throw them off, it will be in exchange for an unbounded licentiousness, passing as usual from one extreme to another. It would be a miracle were they to stop precisely at the point of temperate liberty (Liggio and Peden, 71).”

Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush shared this anti-immigrant sentiment with Jefferson.<sup>2</sup> Their solution was public indoctrination: to give all children strong biases toward the Anglican version of liberty. Although said to be about liberty and equality, the education sought by these founding fathers and others of their time was rather all about subordination of immigrants to Anglican rule. Rush made it clear that schooling was for the purpose of creating two classes, the rulers and the subjects:

“Next to the duty which young men owe to their Creator, I wish to see a supreme regard to their country, inculcated upon them ....Our country includes family, friends and property, and should be preferred to them all. Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property. Let him be taught to love his family, but let him be taught, at the same time, that he must forsake and even forget them, when the welfare of his country requires it. He must watch for the State as if its liberties depended upon his vigilance alone ... . He must be taught how to amass wealth, but it must be only to increase his power of contributing to the wants and demands of the State ... . I am satisfied that the most useful citizens have been those youth who have never known or felt their own wills till they were one and twenty years of age, and I have often thought that society owes a great deal of its order and happiness to the deficiencies of parental government, being supplied by those habits of obedience and subordination which are contracted at schools (Liggio and Peden, 72).”

Jefferson went further in dividing society into distinct classes, it was his belief that African Americans were unassimilable and, though he supported the abolition of slavery, suggested that all free African Americans be under the guardianship of the state, similar to a life-long probation (Liggio and Peden, 71).

#### IV. Protestants versus Catholics

Fortunately for the German and Irish immigrants seeking to preserve their own cultures, efforts to create public school systems in the early 19th century failed. However this idea persisted. New York had a fund for education from 1795 to 1800 and again from 1825 to 1841, but it was left to the local level and each town was required to match the state funding (Liggio and Peden, 74). Boston also had one, but in the late 1820's it enrolled less than half of the school age population (Liggio and Peden, 74-75). Up until the 1840's, schooling in the U.S. was done by heterogeneous private and church organizations for the benefit of their constituents.

The push for public education began again with an increase in immigration to the United States. The number of immigrants annually averaged 20,000 from 1828 to 1832, but by 1836 to 1837 the rate of immigration rose to 76-80 thousand (Liggio and Peden, 75). Anglican

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2 Liggio and Peden, 70-74. These authors cite Jefferson, Franklin, and Rush arguing for methods of preventing non-Anglican cultures from spreading in America.

Americans feared the influx of Catholic immigrants from Europe would lead to the destruction of the republic. So, as the Brahmin and the English had done, the states began creating free public schools for the poor immigrants, now coupled with compulsory attendance (Liggio and Peden, 78). These schools created in the 19th century were officially non-denominational Christian but had a Protestant and anti-catholic bias (Liggio and Peden, 73).

Christianity has had an increasingly smaller role in public education since the 1860's, however religion was never removed. It was merely replaced by a new religion, that of statism. This transformation began with William Torrey Harris, a predominant leader of the educational establishment from the civil war into the progressive era.<sup>3</sup> In the Lancaster model, the curriculum was based on the bible. Similarly, Harris had a curriculum which featured a document, the U.S. Constitution. Harris' courses were designed to focus on American history, the founding documents, and one's civic duty to the state (Liggio and Peden, 77-78). This method, which became the main one in use in the U.S., emphasizes the position of its students under the authority of the nation's rulers.

The Harris schools were like an updated version of Lancaster's but with a new religion for a new age. He also updated the management of children and in doing so created a new class in conflict with most of society. The Madras and Lancaster methods of teaching used a monitorial system where a head student that had mastered the material in a lesson taught and watched the progress of other students. This head student reported the progress of each student to a teacher, and the teacher reported to a headmaster (Gatto 41). To make education compulsory required Harris expanded this bureaucracy with truant officers and clerks (Liggio and Peden, 78). Before this, at least in the realm of schooling, there had been two classes but now a third class was formed, a class of people dependent upon the State's exploitation of tax payers and the indoctrination of children.

Harris was an admirer of the Hindu caste system and was in favor of the lower classes being subservient to the elites (Harris 201). However he did not think the Brahmin had perfect methods for delineating class. Compared to the Chinese social structure that allowed a man born into the poorest family to reach the highest positions in society, Harris saw the Hindu caste and indoctrination as the next step in the progress of civilization (Harris 200). Harris supported the Madras, merchant, military, and priest schools in India, since there "The chief work of education thus consists in teaching each one the rights and duties of his caste so that he shall observe their precise limits, and not pollute himself by passing beyond them (Harris 201)." This "educator" disagreed with the Brahmin only because there one's caste position was determined by one's birth. Anything that tied man to nature was seen as evil by Harris so instead of classification of people by birth, he believed people should be classified by the state (Harris 203).

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3 Gatto, 131-134. William Harris was U.S. Commissioner from 1889 to 1906. He espoused a Hegelian philosophy, "Ninety-nine out of a hundred people in every civilized nation are automata, careful to walk in prescribed paths, careful to follow prescribed customs. This is the result of substantial education which, scientifically defined, is the subsumption of the individual under his species." Harris, p. 2.

Modern American public education uses Harris' model, but mixed with more state and federal regulations, additional bureaucracy and greater power in the hands of the state. Today Americans are dealing with the results of Harris' model for public education and they are the results intended by him, Jefferson, Rush, and Bell; a population trained to serve the state instead of independent-thinking and a class of bureaucrats dependent upon the government. But not all Americans are forced to deal with these perverse institutions of coercive indoctrination.

## V. Elitism and education

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries a few Quakers sought to preserve their status by creating exclusive elite boarding schools (Gatto 275). They were inaugurated with the same goal as the Brahmin schooling; to teach children the duty they had to society as a member of their class. Unlike the public schools, these were for the children of elite businessmen to be taught leadership skills such as speaking and persuasion and instilled in a culture of fierce competition (Gatto 277).

These schools exist to this day and have built bonds with elite colleges and businesses that aid the preservation of family status. From just thirteen of these boarding schools<sup>4</sup> come 10% of the board of directors of American corporations (Cookson 196). There is nothing wrong with successful people who have earned their money on the free-market obtaining for their children a good education. In producing goods for consumers, people of all social standings have been brought together through voluntary efforts to improve their conditions. The problem of class conflict emerges when the graduates of these schools acquire positions of power in the government. From 1897-1973, 90% of U.S. cabinet officers came from these business and social elite classes.<sup>5</sup> Once in positions of political power they are able to influence government policies to their benefit, but all state action comes at the expense of its citizens, through coercion (Benson, 1990; Hasnas, 1995; Rothbard, 1973, 1998).

In the market, education plays the important role of signaling a student's marginal revenue product (MRP)<sup>6</sup> to employers. By funding schools, the government sets the price of education below the market price, which results in an excessive amount of this service purchased. This surplus makes the signaling of MRP more difficult because, with an artificial increase in demand, students must get more education to indicate their MRP to employers. The people hurt most by this surplus are the poor. There is no such thing as a free lunch, and there is no such thing as free education. To get one, students must give up their time and the alternative benefits that would accrue to them,<sup>7</sup> and with more subsidies, this misallocation is exacerbated. For the poor this means having to choose between several years of school to get a better job that

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4 Andover, Choate, Deerfield, Exeter, Groton, Hill, Hotchkiss, Lawrenceville, Milton, St. George's, St. Mark's, St. Paul's, and Taft

5 Cookson, 198. Business elites are senior executives, CEOs and owners of midsize to large companies. The social elite are family members of the business elite and those that socialize with the business elite. Also see on this Domhoff, 1967, 1971, 1998.

6 More technically, *discounted* marginal revenue productivity. See on this Block, 1990.

7 That is, the salaries they could otherwise have been earning

may lift them out of poverty or working a minimum wage job. When a student's budget is tight and the length of education required to signal MRP artificially extended by government funding, incentives are pushed in the direction of low paying jobs that offer less improvement of one's condition. A study from 2006 showed that children from low income families only have a 1% chance of ending up in the top 5% of income distribution (Hertz i).

For middle class students, the government funding of education means they are more likely to attend college to get a job that will boost or at least maintain their standard of living. To help these students pay for college, the federal government has stimulated bank loans to students by guaranteeing the principal. The result of these additional loans has been artificially augmented demand, universities raising their price of tuition and thus increasing the amount of debt a student must go into or savings a student must deplete to pay for college. This rise in tuition constitutes a barrier of entry into the upper class. Now when a student graduates from college, he brings with him an average \$25,000 of debt (Lewin).

Moreover, we have suffered from “bracket creep” or educational inflation. At one time in our history, an eighth grade education was all anyone needed in order to be credentialed for a job. Then, this moved up to a high school degree; if a worker did not have that, he was not really ready for employment. After that, a college degree became the minimum necessary for a reasonable job slot. Nowadays, in a growing number of cases, that simply will not do. Requirements have moved up to an advanced degree, whether in law, business or some other field. Needless to say, student debt has risen in step with this escalation.

## VI. Solutions

If we wish to fix these educational problems we must acknowledge that the foundation of the American schools is not one that helps children, particularly the poor. Public education must be replaced by schools that better serve students, parents, and employers. What these will look like is unclear. In a world of heterogeneous individuals there can exist no single solution. Only by the market can the best methods of education be determined. If the shoe or carrot or paper clip industry had fallen under government control, ownership and regulation, and now it was contemplated that they be privatized, it would be difficult to foresee exactly to format these industries would adopt. All we could “see” would be vague contours. And, so is it with completely privatized educational firms. Perhaps they would resemble the industrial organization of those who give music lessons, or language courses, or karate instruction. All we can know for sure is that no one would be forced at the point of a gun to contribute to them.<sup>8</sup>

To allow this market to form, it is necessary that government entirely leave the field of education. There would be an increased demand for affordable schools and the market would efficiently create a supply for this demand.

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8 For more speculation about private education, see Goolsby and Block. 2003-2004; Rome and Block. 2006; Young and Block. 1999; Whitehead, and Block. 1999; 2000



But what about the poor? This objection is typically lodged against *any* suggestion to privatize *any* service now provided by the state. No doubt, to return to our example of shoes, carrots and paper clips. But the poverty stricken are able to obtain these products even though now provided by private entrepreneurs. The poor need food; that is no argument for the government take-over of farms, groceries and restaurants. The poor need clothing; that is no argument for the government take-over of knitting mills, tailor shops, etc. The poor need shelter; that is no argument for the government take-over of homes, hotels, stores, etc. Indeed, if we *must* have socialism, it would be far better that this pernicious system be instituted for unnecessary items; because when they are in short supply, or of poor quality, as is public education, at least people will not suffer unduly.

## VII. Dirigisme arguments for statist education

Some economists (Friedman, 1962, pp. 85-107) argue that education constitutes an external economy; e.g., it has positive spill-over effects, and that therefore the market will under-produce such a good or service. In their view, this justifies either outright public education, or governmental subsidies to private schools, or perhaps vouchers for students.

What is their argument? It is that people are motivated to demand education for private reasons: to get a better job, a better mate, for the satisfaction of learning, etc. However, as they become more educated, they will become less likely to commit a crime, a more intelligent voter, an improved citizen, a better neighbor, etc. While they can capture this first set of benefits, they cannot do so for this second set, which enrich not themselves, but others. Therefore, they will tend to consult only the private benefits that accrue directly to themselves, while either entirely ignoring, or undervaluing, the gains that enhance the lives of others. The government, then, must shove resource allocation in the direction of education, where it would be were it not for this market failure.

This theory has several weaknesses. First of all, it is elitist. It assumes that the educated are somehow better than the average man. William Buckley Jr., however, once very tellingly said that he would "... rather entrust the government of the United States to the first 400 people listed in the Boston telephone directory than to the faculty of Harvard University."<sup>9</sup> Second, there is counter evidence. All too often, higher education, at least in the liberal arts faculties, consists of little more than brainwashing into the politically correct shibboleths of Marxists, feminists, deconstructionists, multiculturalists, black and queer studies theoreticians, etc. Such *miseducation* hardly qualifies its votaries to the use of intelligence regarding the ballot box. It is no coincidence that rent control is most popular in places boasting of a high proportion of student voters.<sup>10</sup> And yet, one of the highest issues of consensus amongst economists is that rent controls are a disaster for housing, particularly for the poor (Block and Walker, 1988; Frey, et.al, 1984). This hardly bespeaks intelligent voting on the part of the highly educated. Third, given the negative correlation between education and incarceration, the direction of causation is by no means clear. It is entirely possible that those who seek a university degree would not have

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9 [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/w/william\\_f\\_buckley\\_jr.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/w/william_f_buckley_jr.html)

10 <http://oncampus.macleans.ca/education/2011/03/16/students-rally-for-rent-control-in-regina/>

committed many crimes in the first place, even if they did not attain this goal. Fourth, the only way we know for *sure* that someone gained for a good or service is when he places “cash down on the barrelhead.” That is, when he voluntarily *pays* for it. In the absence of such evidence, all claims that people benefit<sup>11</sup> from something they have not purchased can only be speculative. There is such a thing in economics as subjectivism, which this theory fails to reckon with. “One man’s meat is another man’s poison.” For all we know, there is a great amount of resentment of the highly educated; these people *suffer*, to not benefit, when others attain advanced degrees.

Perhaps the strongest condemnation of this theory was penned by Rothbard (1997, 178) in this *reductio absurdum* of public goods which is as follows: “A and B often benefit, it is held, if they can force C into doing something. . . . [A]ny argument proclaiming the right and goodness of, say, three neighbors, who yearn to form a string quartet, forcing a fourth neighbor at bayonet point to learn and play the viola, is hardly deserving of sober comment.”

## VIII. Conclusion

Public schooling, although promoted as a force for equalizing society, has made the poor and middle class worse off by increasing the costs of signaling productivity to employers. The elimination of all government involvement in education is the best way to reduce these costs of education and provide a service that is beneficial to all students. The use of the Hindu system in America, first to acculturate Catholic immigrants in the 19th century then as indoctrination of the authority of the state in the progressive era, suggests that state education was not created to help the poor. The best way to help the poor is by allowing the market to operate as it does with food, clothing, shelter, etc. Some economists believe that this demand will not be high enough but value is subjective, it is impossible to determine if a person benefits from education if he does not voluntarily purchase it. The free-market is the most efficient way to allocate resources to education. Government involvement increases cost and reduces quality of education for the poor and middle class.

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<sup>11</sup> In the *ex ante* sense, of course

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