

For The Record: Return To Community?

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"Centralization," wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, "easily succeeds, indeed, in subjecting the external actions of men to a certain uniformity, which we come at last to love for its own sake, independently of the objects to which it is applied, like those devotees who worship the statue and forget the deity it represents." He continued:

Centralization imparts without difficulty an admirable regularity to the routine of business; provides skillfully for the details of the social police; represses small disorders and petty misdemeanors, maintains society in a status quo alike secure from improvement and decline; and perpetuates a drowsy regularity in the conduct of affairs which the heads of the administration are wont to call good order and public tranquillity; in short, it excels in prevention, but not in action. Its force deserts it when society is to be profoundly moved, or accelerated in its course; and if once the co-operation of private citizens is necessary to the furtherance of its measures, the secret of its impotence is disclosed.

Suddenly his words are applicable in one of the many controversies surrounding the schools.

In New York City, a report called *Reconnection for Learning* has been submitted to the Mayor by his Advisory Panel on Decentralization of the New York City Schools. It is subtitled "A Community School System for New York City"; and, although we do not yet know whether the recommendations will be accepted, we suspect that the so-called "Bundy Report" may be indicative of a tendency of thought with considerable importance for the culture as a whole. The situation which gave rise to it is obviously not confined to New York. "The true measure of a structure of formal education," reads the Report, "is its effect on individual children. By this standard, the system of public education in New York is failing, because vast numbers, if not the majority of the pupils, are not learning

adequately." There are few large urban centers in the north which can boast a brighter picture. And, especially where there are slums and large minority populations, many cities besides New York are confronting a loss of confidence in the public schools, "malaise," disillusionment, protest, and unrest.

What interests us particularly, a-part from the still problematic proposal for "a liberating decentralization," is the return to the traditional notion of community—in effect, the face-to-face community—as palliative. We are immediately reminded of the pastoral *communitas* described by Paul and Percival Goodman, and espoused by many dissident, apolitical youth. We are reminded of the Jeffersonian freeholder, of 19th century townships and town meetings, of all who have dreamed of perpetuating the democratic ideal by allowing the individual citizen a voice, a sense of participation—and, in time, some exercise of responsibility.

"The very fact of exclusion from participation is a subtle form of suppression," wrote John Dewey two decades ago, in *Problems of Men*.

It gives individuals no opportunity to reflect and decide upon what is good for them. Others who are supposed to be wiser and who in any case have more power decide the question for them, and also decide the methods and means by which subjects may arrive at the enjoyment of what is good for them. This form of coercion and suppression is more subtle and more effective than is overt intimidation and restraint...The individuals of the submerged mass may not be very wise. But there is one thing they are wiser about than anybody else can be, and that is where the shoe pinches and the troubles they suffer from.

He was not talking about education specifically, nor about the public schools; but his point of view seems oddly similar to the one expressed by many critics of the schools today. The public school, especially

the ghetto public school, afflicts many people, we are told, as if it were an alien and threatening institution. Those immediately affected by it (the children and the parents) have not been asked to decide "what is good for them." The presumably "wiser" group (the one that happens to have both power and expertise) has not only been denied the cooperation of many "private citizens" in the slums; it has been overtly challenged by some of them, often scorned, often defied.

As Preston Wilcox, Joe Rempson, and others have made clear in the pages of the RECORD, certain ones whose shoes are pinching are becoming increasingly verbal and militant. There is talk of "separatism" as the only appropriate response to a system that is essentially "racist." Separatism has been distinguished from segregation in several ways. Some say that separatism is chosen, while segregation is imposed; and that this makes the crucial difference. Others talk in terms of control and power: Roy Innis, Chairman of Harlem CORE, is quoted in New Generation (Fall 1967) as saying that segregation means "that if you have a heterogeneous society in which people live in separate areas, one group controls the goods and services and institutions in the area of the minority, or of the less powerful group." Where the public schools are concerned, this implies that a remote white administration exerts total control over the ghetto school system, which is to all intents and purposes a "black school system." Separation would mean moving into a bargaining position with respect to the federal government and various universities (so that, as Victor Solomon puts it in the New Generation "Dialogue," the local people who controlled the schools might "contract with any school system or university to train teachers according to our requirements"). It is, for its proponents, a means of gaining the only effective power possible for a minority "under the present system."

A number of Negro leaders stress the necessity for recognizing an emergent "black community," which is no longer willing to depend upon white people to provide its skills, its orientations, and its values. Wilcox, for instance, talks of distinctive "black community values" which he believes ought

to be taught in the ghetto schools. Drawing attention to the thousands of Negro immigrants from the rural South, he has occasionally used the model of the small country school for the community school he hopes to see established in the urban slum. At other times, he has described a school organized to serve as a center for various kinds of community activity, involving adults as well as children in what educational reformers used to call "social reconstruction"—making the school, as Harold Rugg once put it, "the center of the rebuilding of their lives."

Numerous questions arise: questions having to do with the demonstrated relevance of integration for improvements in learning; questions concerning the implications of separatism for a public school charged with the task of initiating children into the cultural "mainstream"; questions relative to the viability of face-to-face communities in a "corporate society." But, for all the uncertainty and doubt, the terrible facts remain. Not only has "equality of opportunity" not been achieved in the northern cities; not only are ghetto schools demonstrably less effective than the schools of the middle class. Centralization, as it has worked out in many major cities, has apparently had the effects the spokesmen for separatism describe. There tend, indeed, to be two systems (whether intentionally planned that way or not); and one system (pilot projects despite, remediation programs despite) is inferior to the other.

The evidence has been overwhelming. There have been the facts presented in the Coleman Report, Equality of Educational Opportunity, in the Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, Racial Isolation in the Public Schools, in the Passow Report on the Washington, D.C. Schools, in the recent compilation of reports edited by Dentler, Mackler, and Warshauer of New York's Center for Urban Education, entitled The Urban R's: Race Relations as the Problem in Urban Education. The causal factors are differently weighted; the recommendations differ to an extent; but the pictures that emerge are all the same.

Lately, a number of more informal accounts of the ghetto schools have appeared. They

put flesh on the bones of the statistical accounts and the compilations of research workers; and some of them have aroused an amount of public interest. In 1966, there was *The Schoolchildren: Growing Up in the Slums*, by Mary Frances Greene and Orletta Ryan (Pantheon), a collection of classroom sketches by two Harlem elementary school teachers. For all the new programs, for all the so-called "enrichment," for all the special services, the ghetto classrooms presented here—above everything—manifest a dreadful lack of understanding and concern on the part of those responsible for administering them. Somewhat later, there was Peter Schrag's *Village School Downtown* (Beacon), a deeply disturbing description of the Boston school system. At one point the author writes:

Boston's educational program is pathetically irrelevant---it makes sense only for those who see little value in powerful education in the first place, or who have accepted a subservient, limited image of themselves and their possibilities. It pays lip service to the idea of independent thought, to an emphasis on process, but it practices preaching and the accumulation of facts about irrelevant details.... It stresses 'free enterprise' but ignores the vicious damage that it inflicts; it talks about the democratic society but fails to acknowledge the corruption that exists in profusion in every community, and in the slums with a vengeance; it demands haircuts and neckties but ignores the vulgarity and ugliness of the buildings in which they must be worn; it upholds the value of the individual but denies him the right to go to the John without a pass; it eulogizes the historical right of protest but patronizes those who now attempt to exercise it...

More recently, there has been Jonathan Kozol's book about his experience as a substitute teacher in Boston's public schools. Beautifully written (and its style may have a good deal to do with the success of the book), *Death at an Early Age* (Houghton Mifflin) tells what it feels like to teach in schools so old and delapidated that windows blow in, walls peel, and the basements (where children are beaten) are as dark and dank as outmoded prisons. Kozol's subtitle is "The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds

of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools"; and he appears to have found the primary cause in (apart from individual hypocrisy and ineptitude) "unearned and undeserved authority ... based upon political maneuvering and upon the ingestion and assimilation of platitudes...."

Something similar was implied by the film called "The Way It Is," made by New York University's Clinic for Learning at a junior high school in the Brooklyn ghetto—an experiment which, its sponsors say, may be considered a failure because (probably) of the way authority is used in the schools. Another recent book, Herbert Kohl's *36 Children* (New American Library) also tells "the way it is" in the Harlem schools, even as it presents rare examples of the personal writing a gifted teacher can free his students to do. But, according to Kohl, he can only function honestly and with care if he goes it alone, staying out of the administrators' paths. "It was useless," he writes, "trying to fight the administration over their irresponsibility." Then:

So I learned to keep quiet, keep the door of my classroom shut, and make believe that the class and I functioned in a vacuum, that the school around us didn't exist. It was difficult not to feel the general chaos—to observe the classes without teachers, the children wandering aimlessly, sometimes wantonly through the halls, disrupting classes, intimidating, extorting, yet being courted by the administration: "Please don't make trouble, anything you want, but no trouble."

Edgar Z. Friedenberg, reviewing the Kozol and Kohl books in the November 18 *Saturday Review*, supplements what he finds there with an account of his own experiences in a Buffalo school. His conclusion is flat and somewhat shocking: "The urban slum schools are run by awful people." He talks about the tyrannical, silly, sick, and timid teachers who would never be tolerated by the middle class. He says categorically (and, we believe, characteristically):

It seems to me important, for the sake of clarity, that a moral judgment be made. These people are not going to be improved

by instruction or therapy; they do not have good intentions; and so long as they dominate the schools, the schools are not going to be improved from within. But they may possibly be improved by coercion from without. We are dealing here with people who have a lot of faith in punishment, manipulation, and taking orders from above—and remedies do usually work with people who have faith in them, even when they are useless or harmful to others.

His conclusion is similar to that of the separatists, whose concern with "power" he applauds. ("The Black Power movement, if it succeeds, thus will certainly improve the ghetto schools.") He suggests that, if parents at length attain a measure of control, the bureaucracies will be replaced, and the more rigid teachers and administrators will either adapt or "flounce off into retirement."

Reading this and then returning to the Bundy Report, we are impressed once again with the diversity of motives—and even of definitions—finding expression in the demand for "community schools." We are also impressed (and somewhat depressed) by the assumption that integration, so long a cherished objective of liberal schoolmen, is presently unattainable. The Bundy Report takes note of the many unsuccessful efforts to reduce racial imbalance in the New York City Schools, and it acknowledges the existence of data indicating that integration has a "positive effect on Negro achievement" without affecting white children's achievement levels. (The often overlooked factor of social class should be acknowledged as well. Numerous sources, including the Coleman Report, stress the primary importance of integrating children of different classes, not simply white and black.) The writers of *Reconnection for Learning*, in any case, assert that the first concern—given current population trends—is "quality education" in the existing schools. Integration, they say, remains "a necessary goal of policy"; but they believe that it will occur "only after a drastic improvement in the general effectiveness of New York's schools."

The proposals may be put into effect, but the question will (and should) remain open. In the Symposium transcribed for our January

issue, Bayard Rustin expressed considerable scepticism about the future of community-controlled schools; and he undoubtedly speaks for a number of Negro leaders—and many Negro citizens—when he continues to emphasize the necessity for integration and the possible dangers of separatism. The recent debate in *The New Republic* (July, September 1967) between Joseph Alsop and Robert Schwartz, Thomas Pettigrew, and Marshall Smith indicates the proliferation of problematic issues. Alsop, in "No more Nonsense About Ghetto Education!", reports on the inadequacy of Negro children's education, the present impossibility of desegregation, the hopes he places in such exemplars of "quality education" as the More Effective Schools in New York. Schwartz, Pettigrew, and Smith challenge his claims for the MES program, say he is raising "false expectations," and insist that there do indeed remain opportunities for desegregation, as evidenced in certain smaller cities. They recognize the difficulty posed by the large ghetto, but they believe that "metropolitan and public-private cooperation" or federal encouragement of metropolitan consolidation might eventually do the required job. In the November 27 issue of *The Nation*, Ivor Kraft takes up the same cudgels in an article called "Retreat to Separate but Equal." Objecting to our preoccupation with grade-level standings, he writes that the "social, psychological, moral and even political gains of an integrated educational system far outweigh the mechanical point differences in IQ and grade-level scores." Alarmed by the abandonment of the commitment to integration, he writes:

There is no future for a democratic and humanistic civilization in America premised on a system of black apartheid schools, a philosophy of "black education" that erects aims and methods and beliefs that will somehow be different from another system that is called "white education"....

Nevertheless, there remain the hard facts and the apparent ineffectual-ity of centralized authority. Marilyn Gittell's important study of school policy-making in New York (*Participants and Participation*, just published by Praeger) stresses the lack

of public participation in policy-making due to the absence of "visible decision-making" and of necessary information. She says that, in New York City, policies are actually made by a group of supervisors at headquarters, professional bureaucrats committed to maintaining the status quo; and she, too, calls for the kind of decentralization that will shift power to the local level and bring the school closer to the community. Even though it now appears (as it does in the Bundy Report) that shifting power in this way will militate against integration and sustain various kinds of separatism, the argument against centralization ought not, it seems to us, be permitted to become an argument against integration as well. To say that integration remains the "necessary goal" may be insufficient. The long recognized evils of over-centralized authority present one set of difficulties; the remedy of decentralization, in the case of the schools, has its own signal deficiencies which must be recognized and named, even as decentralization takes place.

The situation in the big cities will remain tragic and in an important sense hopeless until the kinds of reforms are undertaken which result in increased employment (or some kind of universal allowance), decently open housing, and the acceptance of what Alfred J. Kahn calls "social utilities" on an ever-increasing scale. Where the schools are concerned, decentralization is undoubtedly an improvement over the kind of centralization which permits the kinds of institutions described by Kozol, Kohl, and the others to exist. There is no guarantee, however, that parent participation will improve the quality of instruction to such a degree (as Friedenberg and the writers of the Bundy Report seem to hope) that middle class children will be attracted back to the inner city schools. Community boards, parents, and teachers will vary; the degree of participation will vary, sometimes with the degree of activism within a given community. "Improvement of instruction" will mean, for some parents, a return to the most extreme kind of formalism; for others, it may mean creative experimentation of the sort now apparent in the British infant schools.

We cannot but feel hopeful, if only because of the opening of channels, the identification

of new possibilities. But we believe it necessary to keep in mind the different interpretations of what is happening. It is important to recognize, for example, that parent participation spells power—frequently "black power"—to certain community spokesmen, whose plans and expectations differ considerably from those we associate with the Ford Foundation and the writers of the Bundy Report. It is important to confront afresh one of the most complex problems of pluralism: how to reconcile the demands for group identity and distinctiveness with the requirements of membership in the larger society. Also, it seems important to keep in the mind the coincidence of various kinds of youthful dissent against the "middle class establishment" (from which so many dissenters have come) with the kinds of challenge posed by Edgar Friedenberg (and perhaps Kozol and Kohl as well) when he writes: "The authoritarianism and the shabby-genteel squeamishness of the schools have played a fundamental part in confirming the social attitudes toward Negroes—or, for that matter, toward any group thought to have an exuberant and expressive personal style—among lower-middle-class whites on whom the schools then draw for community support."

We are suggesting, in sum, that the time is one of the most profound and troubling unease—and that the protests against centralization are in some dimensions protests against the social order we have made. The Bundy Report speaks of a "liberating decentralization." We know what the schools should be liberated from; we are not sure that anyone yet knows what they are to be liberated for. Answers may come when the "actions of men" are no longer subjected to what de Tocqueville called "a certain uniformity." Answers may come when individuals act upon what Dewey called "the opportunity to reflect and decide upon what is good for them." Answers may come when persons begin engaging themselves once more in the deliberate creating of communities at a moment in history when what is meant by "community" seems to have decayed.

Thirty years ago, John Dewey said:

The crisis that we have undergone will turn out, I think, to be worthwhile if we have learned through it that every generation has to accomplish democracy over again for itself; that its very nature, its essence, is something that cannot be handed on from one person or one generation to another, but has to be worked out in terms of needs, problems and conditions of the social life of

which, as the years go by, we are a part, a social life that is changing with extreme rapidity from year to year.

Crisis, change, uncertainty—these must become foundations of possibility, the occasion for new hope.

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