

BEYOND EDUCATION

By Gustavo Esteva

The beginning of the end of the era of education has already started.

The experts acknowledge that the state of education cannot be worse. The system is not delivering; it does not prepare people for life or work. The majority of people on Earth are uneducated or undereducated... and the main outcome of education is drop-outs. According to UNESCO, 60% of the children now entering in the first grade will never reach the level that in their countries is obligatory. They will thus be discriminated against for the rest of their lives: they will lack the passport now required to circulate in modern societies. Those that reach the end of the educational ladder, accumulating 20 or 30 years of school, cannot find jobs in whatever they studied. An increasing number of engineers and philosophers are now driving taxis or tending stalls.

Given this picture, the experts urgently demand reforms to cure education of its ills. Educational reformers can be grouped in three categories. Some look to improve the classroom: its methods, equipment or personnel. Others attempt to liberate it from any bureaucratic imposition: that parents and communities decide by themselves the content and methods of education. Still others attempt to transform the whole society into a classroom: new technologies should substitute the closed space of the classroom for open markets and remote teaching.

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Reformed, free and world-wide classrooms: three stages in the escalation of interventions to increase social control and thus prevent the bankruptcy of the main modern tool to subjugate people.

The educators have educated the world in the fallacy that education is as old as the hills. But it is exclusively modern: it was born with capitalism and for the same purpose. We colonize the past if we consider education as an equivalent to other past or present practices and institutions to learn or study. To children education was still a novelty in the

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XVII century, when a new conviction was adopted in Europe: man is born stupid and lacks vital competence unless he is educated. Education was thus established as a new original sin, defining the inverse of vital competence.

Education is promoted in the name of equality and justice. It is presented as the best remedy for the oppressive inequalities of modern society: it offers "equal opportunity." It produces exactly the opposite. No matter how much societies invest in education, most people fail to reach the end of the process and are disqualified as unfit for a man-made world. Education creates the most oppressive of the class divisions defining modern society. It separates people in two groups: the educated and the uneducated or undereducated, knowledge capitalists and destitute. In the new class structure, more value is attributed to those consuming more knowledge; since the society invests in them, for the creation of "human capital," the means of production are reserved for them. Some get all kinds of privileges; the rest suffer all kinds of discriminations and disqualifications.

The reformers continually dispute the content or method of the reform, but share the same purpose: to reaffirm the social prejudice that education is the only legitimate way to prepare people to live. As education is made the consumption of knowledge, the new generations are educated to participate in that addiction, under the assumption that their success will depend of the quantity and quality of their consumption of that commodity, and that learning about the world is better than to learn from the world.

The most dangerous reformers are today those substituting the classroom for the massive distribution of knowledge packages, and establishing their consumption as a basic requirement for survival. While traditional reformers are still promising more and better schools, their current enemies are winning the race. They present themselves as the only ones who will be able to reach the accepted goal of everyone: equality of access.

Those reformers may contribute to disestablish the school, but only to extend its function. They attempt to transform the global village into an environmental womb, in which pedagogic therapists will control, under the appearance of a free market, the complex placenta that nourishes every human being. The regulation of intellectual rights, now

being negotiated in international institutions, will protect the activity of the corporations producing and distributing the knowledge packages that from now on will define education.

Education, like capital, began primitive accumulation through force. The police and the army are still being used to extend and deepen the educational control. In the process, however, education became established as a personal and collective need. As other needs, it was soon transformed into a right. It operates today as a bureaucratic imposition and as a legitimate and universally accepted social addiction: it stimulates knowledge consumers to freely, passionately and compulsively acquire their chains and thus contribute to the construction of the global Big Brother.

Marx's rhetorical question: Who educates the educators? is still valid. Tolstoi observed that education is a conscious effort to transform someone into something. More and more that 'something' is a subsystem, a creature of an oppressive system. Education is already the main tool to reproduce it. Modern technologies, particularly those linking TV and internet, will lead the oppression farther than ever before.

Marx also observed that the blind compulsion to produce too many useful things will end producing useless people. The current global escalation accentuates the process. Perhaps capital has more appetite than ever, but it has not enough stomach to digest everyone. It cannot offer employment for most people and is closing for them the globalized markets. An increasing number of people become thus "disposable" human beings: there is no way for capital to exploit them. By giving them, with public funds, access to knowledge packages, capital educates them as consumers and prepares them for the moment in which it can subsume them again into the system of exploitation.

Such "disposable" people, however, as well as those expelled by the crisis from any payroll, have started to react everywhere. There is a proliferation of initiatives escaping from the logic of capital: they transform the drama of exclusion into the opportunity to follow their own path and to produce by themselves their own life. One of their first steps is to escape education.

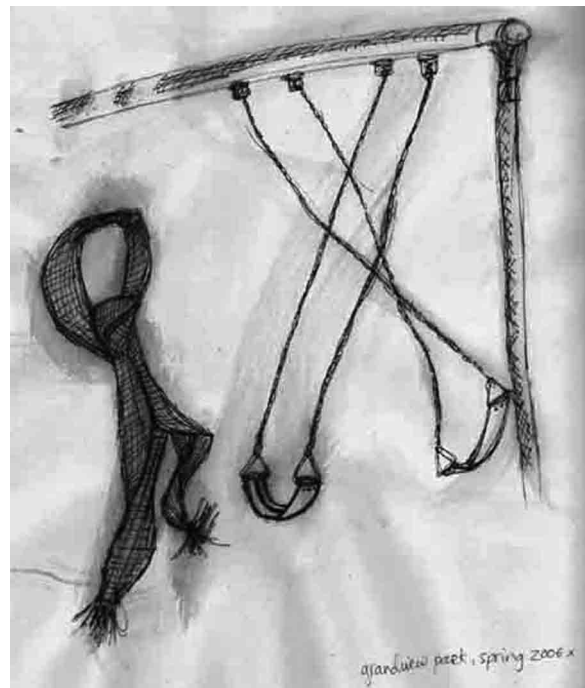
In 1953, when education was included in the promotion of development launched by Truman in 1949, UNESCO experts concluded that the main obstacle to education in Latin America was the indifference or resistance of most

Art by: aly de la cruz

parents. Eleven years later, the same experts warned that no Latin American society will ever be able to meet the demand of education. The campaign had been successful. Parents educated in the idea of education began to demand more teachers and schools, always insufficient for the majority. The same process was reproduced everywhere, in different periods. During the last 20 years, however, the impulses to resist-and/or-claim began to be transformed into a struggle for liberation.

The illusion that education delivers employment, prestige and social mobility leads many people to accept its high price: severe cultural destruction and dismembering of family and community life. Step by step, the social majorities got the proof that the diplomas did not certify competence or skills: they certify a number of hours and years during which the ass of a student sat in a school chair. Far from guaranteeing employment, they doom to permanent frustration. The humiliation of engineers or lawyers, forced to work as taxi drivers or hotel porters, becomes an opportunity for liberation for those without diploma or with one of minimum value: they are thus able to revalue their own wisdom, their skills, their competence to live.

While internet accelerates the disestablishment of school suggested by Ivan Illich 40 years ago in the terms I describe in the above paragraphs, the social majorities are bypassing it, as they do, whenever they can, with all bureaucratic impositions and the addictions of the rich. But they are no longer surrendering themselves to the illusions of education.



People are saying: Enough! They recover little by little their old art of learning, in which every baby is an expert. Given the fact that education is the economization of learning, which transforms it into the consumption of a commodity called knowledge, people recover their own notion of learning to live. Since the noun education imposes a radical dependence on the public or private system of education or of any educator, they substitute it for the verb to learn, which reestablishes the autonomous capacity to keep a creative relationship with others and with nature that generates knowing, wisdom. People acknowledge again that to know is a personal experience, and that the only way to know, to widen the competence to live, is to learn from the world, not about the world. To think, said once Raimón Panikkar, is the creative act through which man knows, that is, identifies himself with reality and thus changes it. To study, said Ivan Illich, should be the leisurely activity of free people.

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There are still many people demanding education or struggling within the system to improve it, often in tense competition with governments, private corporations and professional educators. Many others are enjoying their time in school and trying to get from it as much as they can. Other groups struggle, inside and outside the system to promote “alternative education.” They begin with a solid critique of the dominant system of education and introduce interesting pedagogical innovations, for example in the tradition of Freire. But they avoid criticizing the very idea of education, as an authoritarian tool of social control, and especially the society that needs education to reproduce itself—a society, the capitalist society, in which the production, distribution and consumption of the commodity called education becomes the most important sector of the economy and absorbs the highest proportion of the population.

At the same time, a vigorous movement advances in another direction. All kind of practices for autonomous and free learning are increasingly popular and they generate their own institutional arrangements, outside, against and beyond the dominant system. Such practices, supported by their own theoretical apparatus, cannot be accommodated within the current conceptual frameworks, and reclaim ancient traditions for learning and introduce

contemporary technologies to learn and study as free and joyful activities.

It is a peculiar movement. It is possibly the biggest in the world, in terms of the number of people involved: probably billions. But it is mostly invisible and many of those participating in it are not aware that they are involved in a social or political movement, although they celebrate to discover others like them, are continually engaged in horizontal relations and are used to sharing their experiences. They are usually aware of the meaning of what they are doing: they fully experience the radicalism of breaking with all forms of education to learn and study in freedom.

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It has become impossible to estimate qualities and quantities in the movement. One of its forms is the so called free school. Google reports more than 500 million references, most of which allude to ongoing initiatives. Something similar happens with “learning communities” and other expressions describing different aspects of the movement.

Here and there some people close schools or put them under community control. They start public campaigns to impose heavy taxes to schooling, like those to alcohol and tobacco, instead of allocating them public funds. Other campaigns struggle to abrogate all laws making education obligatory. But the main impulse follows another direction. While the educated persist in their competitive struggle to consume more knowledge, the uneducated or undereducated acknowledge again that to know is a personal experience and relation, controlled by the person learning. Before the propaganda to sell knowledge, they adopt the attitude they take before junk food: they know that the latter does not nourish, although sometimes may entertain hunger, and the first is junk knowledge, unable to generate wisdom.

In opposing education, the people are now reaffirming their freedom to learn. No educator, whoever it is, should define a program to give vital competence to everyone or the common path to learn or study.

In reestablishing or regenerating forms of apprenticeship or convivial places to learn and study together, the people now enjoys the affluence of exploring whatever they want

or need to explore. They now experience knowledge as an outcome of a personal interaction with others and the world, instead of being reduced to the consumption of a commodity now packaged as knowledge.

While Bill Gates and his colleagues prolong the agony of education, and parents and students resist the reduction of education budgets, many people are anticipating its death with creative, convivial initiatives, which widen their capacity to learn, to study and to do (instead of the capacity to buy and to consume) and redefine their responsibilities in their old or new commons.

So undermining the dominant institutions, they prepare their inversion. They hope, for example, that the extinction of the educational rituals, which already appears in the horizon, will set the beginning of an era ending privilege and license.

Suggested readings: Wendell Berry, *Life Is A Miracle*, Washington: Counterpoint, 2000; M.K. Gandhi, *Towards New Education, Ahmedabad: Navajivan*, 1995; Ivan Illich, *Deschooling society*, New York: Harper, 1971; "In Lieu of Education", in *Toward A History of Needs*, New York: Pantheon, 1977; and, with Barry Sanders, *The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*, San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988; M. Prakash and G. Esteva, *Escaping Education*, New York: Lang, 1998.

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