

The Crisis of Education in America: “How to Become a Serf”

A society in which people exist for the sake of companies is a society enslaved

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How to Become a Serf

Man is a pathetic creature; a brute trying to be god but traveling in the wrong direction.

Educational systems now train workers to fulfill the needs of companies. A society in which people exist for the sake of companies is a society enslaved. But there's a deep problem with the notion that education should equal vocational training. To paraphrase a very famous and renowned person, man does not live by work alone. Indeed, the knowledge and skills needed to earn a living in a capitalist industrial economy are of little use in human relationships, and human relationships are the core of everyone's life. Schools devoted to vocational training provide no venue for teaching cultural differences, for trying to understand the person who lives next door or in another country. Value systems are never evaluated; alternatives are never considered. As a result, although we all live on the same planet, we do not live together. At best, we only live side by side. At worst, we live to kill each other. Education as vocational training reduces everything to ideology, our devotion to which causes us to reject the stark reality that stares us in the face, because our ideologies color the realities we see and people never get wiser than those of previous generations. People have become nothing but the monkeys of hurdy gurdy grinders, tethered to grinders' organs with tin cups in hands to be filled for the benefit of the grinders. And this is the species we refer to as sapient. What a delusion!

For many years, I have been troubled by what I saw as the results of what passes for education in America and perhaps elsewhere too. Why is it, do you suppose, that one generation does not seem to get any smarter than the previous one? Oh, it may know more of this or that, but what it “knows” does not translate into smarts. In other words, why don't people ever seem to get wiser? Why do they repeat the same mistakes over and over?

For centuries, an education was thought to be comprised of considerably more than one providing the skills and requirements needed to carry on a trade or profession. For instance, consider this [passage](#):

“Education is not the same as training. Plato made the distinction between *techne* (skill) and *episteme* (knowledge). Becoming an educated person goes beyond the acquisition of a technical skill. It requires an understanding of one's place in the world—cultural as well as natural—in pursuit of a productive and meaningful life. And it requires historical perspective so that one does not just live, as Edmund Burke said, like ‘the flies of a summer,’ born one

day and gone the next, but as part of that 'social contract' that binds our generation to those who have come before and to those who are yet to be born.

An education that achieves those goals must include the study of what Matthew Arnold called 'the best that has been known and said.' It must comprehend the whole—the human world and its history, our own culture and those very different from ours. . . ."

This idea of an educated person was often summarized in the phrases, a Renaissance man, and *un homme du monde*. But these expressions are hardly heard any more. Educated people no longer exist. We are nothing but the monkeys of hurdy gurdy grinders, tethered to grinders' organs with tin cups in hands to be filled for the benefit of the grinders.

"[Governor Rick Snyder](#) wants to tie retraining programs to companies' needs . . . and encourage more Michigan residents to earn math and science degrees under an initiative aimed at making workers more competitive in the global marketplace."

The hurdy gurdy grinder's monkey exists for the sake of the organ grinder; Governor Snyder wants Michigan's residents to educate themselves for the sake of companies. Workers are to fulfill companies' needs rather than *vice versa*. President Obama has said similar things.

But there's something wrong, something terribly wrong, with this picture. A society in which people exist for the sake of some non-human entity is a society enslaved. And this picture gets even more horrid with the realization that workers are expected to pay to acquire the required skills. Students are being asked to pay for the privilege of becoming serfs.

Living things in the natural world exist as ends in themselves. Everything they do is done for their own benefit or the benefit of their offspring. Horses in the wild do not acquire skills in order to perform tasks that benefit other horses. When a human being acquires a horse and trains it to perform a skill for the person's benefit, the person provides for all the natural needs of his horse. Horses don't come begging to be trained to be ridden. What kind of perversion is the requirement that people should beg to be trained to be serfs?

But neither a hurdy gurdy grinder's monkey or a riding horse are educated; they are trained. There is no such thing as a Renaissance monkey!

Education in America, and perhaps other places too, is as fractured as shattered glass. The federal agency called the Department of Education's only power is the ability to cajole schools mainly by offering them money. There are public and private schools, and the public ones are governed by local school boards, the members of which are not even required to be able to read or write. State school boards exist to have some influence over local boards, but again, the power of the states is limited. Education in America is a local affair. The people on these school boards are the ones that control what is and how it is taught. For instance, creationism is often given equal standing with evolution. Students are often required to engage in practices that are clearly unconstitutional. All of this is done to suit the views of school board members, not society or even students.

Teachers are certified by subject matter. Perfectly good mathematics teachers may not be able to write literate essays. English teachers are not required to understand even elementary algebra. The schools do not employ *hommes de monde*. And what is true in the primary and secondary schools is also true in colleges and universities. *Les spécialistes* rule the classroom. Trained monkeys all!

Now vocational training works, of course, if people know what industries need workers and if workers want those jobs. But often, especially in times of crisis, this knowledge doesn't exist. Yet there's a deeper problem with the notion that education should equal vocational training. To paraphrase a very famous and renowned person, man does not live by work alone. Indeed, the knowledge and skills needed to earn a living in a capitalist industrial economy are of little use in human relationships, and human relationships are the core of everyone's life.

Although the United States is often referred to as a multicultural melting pot, most highly developed nations today have multicultural populations. Different cultures embody different values. Those values often clash and erupt in violent behavior. If people understood these cultural differences, these clashes could be ameliorated. But schools devoted to vocational training provide no venue for teaching cultural differences, for trying to understand the person who lives next door or in another country. Various value systems are never evaluated, and alternatives are never considered. As a result, although we all live on the same planet, we do not live together. At best, we only live side by side. At worst, we live to kill each other.

Education as vocational training reduces everything to ideology. Religion is an ideology and no one ever questions a person's right to her/his own. Economics, although often touted as a science, is an ideology. Part of free market economic theory is the belief that when an established industry falters and declines, some new industry will come forth and employ the newly unemployed. But nothing in economics can compel that to happen. This belief is akin to the belief in a Second Coming. It is purely ideological. Even science has become an ideology. People believe, for instance, that science will discover solutions to all of our problems. But again, there is nothing in science that compels that. It is perfectly possible that, as human beings destroy their environment, science will be unable to correct the damage and that life on this planet will perish. Worse, ideologies contribute to human stupidity; our devotion to them causes us to reject the stark realities that stare us in the face. (See [here](#) and [here](#).)

So what is required if we are to make one generation smarter than the previous one? We need to educate Renaissance men who comprehend the whole human world, its history, our own culture, and those very different from ours. Vocational training will never produce such people.

John F. Kennedy was glorified when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country." Shouldn't he have been vilified? Do countries exist to benefit their peoples or do their peoples exist to benefit their countries? What good is a country that requires the sacrifice of its people?

Since the Enlightenment, it is generally agreed that legitimate governments are those that govern with the consent of their peoples. Does anyone really believe that people would consent to living in a nation that made it clear that the lives of most citizens would be fated to live for the benefit of the few who control the nation's institutions? Isn't that exactly what slavery is?

Analytical thinking, even when valid, can lead people down invalid roads, because analysis alone tends to overly simplify questions. When used to answer the question, What must be done to put unemployed people to work?, it leads to attempts to make education equivalent to vocational training. But when put into practice, it results in people who lack the ability to

understand their value systems and evaluate them properly. They end up being hurdy gurdy monkeys or, as Arnold put it, the flies of a summer, born one day and gone the next. If a nation's institutions do not exist to benefit its citizens, the institutions, not the people, are faulty.

In Classical Greece it was known that the unexamined human life is not worth living. Vocational training never presents people with opportunities to examine one's life; so people end up relying entirely on ideologies which have no intellectual basis and are often absurdly false, but "falsehoods are not only evil in themselves, they infect the soul with evil."

If human beings wish to endure, their ideologies must be subjected to serious criticism; otherwise, no generation will ever be smarter than its predecessors and continuing to refer to ourselves as sapient is a sheer delusion.

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