Libertarian liberals

The revolution—the one foretold in so many platforms, political speeches, and books of the 1960s and early 1970s—didn’t really happen. Of course things changed, but not exactly as promised. Though several important social and intellectual trends can be traced to this period, the era still produced more talk than action. A key example was the birth, among some members of the New Left, of a sometimes promising antibureaucratic education movement.

No radical group was complete without an education arm in those days. The Black Panthers set up weekend classrooms to deprogram children of the racism they imbibed from the public schools during the week, while Bill Ayers, a co-founder of the Weather Underground, worked to set up “alternative schools.” The campaign to take on The System and its schools also enjoyed the services of a handful of intellectual spokesmen whose written works outline a case against education bureaucracy that remains brilliant in many small ways, if repulsive in several big ones.

Drawing on earlier criticism of the organization society and its alienating effects, social critic Paul Goodman, already famous for his subversive Growing Up Absurd (1960),

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condemned the school system in toto with a slim volume called *Compulsory Mis-education and the Community of Scholars* (1962). Meanwhile, the rebel Catholic priest Ivan Illich took up the cause of Puerto Rican poor people on his way to writing his education manifesto, *Deschooling Society* (1971). Illich would later propose a constitutional amendment summing up his iconoclastic critique of institutional education: “The State shall make no law regarding the establishment of education.” But Illich represented the beginning of the end of the Left’s interest in a laissez-faire approach to education.

History has not been kind to Illich or Goodman. Diane Ravitch dismissed their work in her history of education reform, *The Troubled Crusade*, as a literary sensation. And the Left hasn’t exactly kept the flame burning. Although included in Richard Posner’s recent list of six hundred prominent public intellectuals, Illich has lost almost all of the stature that once led the *New York Review of Books*, and even some mainstream publications like the *Saturday Review*, to treat him as a modern-day oracle. In 1989 literary essayist Anatole Broyard, a one-time booster, wrote in the *New York Times* that he’d purged his library of Illich’s works. Goodman is best remembered perhaps as an early example of the Left’s continuing problem with anti-Americanism, as the progressive thinker Richard Rorty portrayed him in *Achieving Our Country* (1999).

Yet many of Illich’s and Goodman’s arguments foreshadowed criticism later taken up by school choice advocates on the Right, where until 1996 the Republican party platform still called for abolishing the Department of Education. And today, both the Left and the Right harbor pockets of antibureaucratic resistance and support for arrangements that aspire to take power away from the state, or what the New Left used to call The System.

**A Roman-Collar Rebel**

According to the antibureaucratic Left, there was little wrong with American society that wasn’t the fault of The System. Illich’s *Deschooling Society* put a slightly different twist on this argument, alleging that there was almost nothing wrong with The System that wasn’t the fault of the schools. One critic commented that he wasn’t against schools, “but once a certain threshold of institutionalization is reached, schools make people more stupid.” That threshold, for Illich, came soon.

A Viennese-born Catholic priest and theologian, Illich had some firsthand experience with bureaucracies. In fact, he was being groomed for service in one of the world’s oldest, headquartered in the Vatican, when he was transferred to a Hispanic parish in New York City in 1952 for what was supposed to be a training exercise on the way to big things in the church hierarchy. Instead, Illich found himself ministering to the parish poor. He ended up moving to Puerto Rico for his next assignment. And there he quickly clashed with the local bishop, who had forbidden Catholics to vote for a political candidate who advocated state-sponsored birth control.

Illich eventually broke with the church for good in 1969: Rome called him “politically immoral,” and he left the priesthood. He continued his intellectual critique of the establishment from his Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, Mexico, a school he had founded in 1960 to train missionaries in the language and culture of Latin America. Illich would use CIDOC as an experiment in education and as a center for discussions and debates on important social topics of the day. The center played a critical role in the writing of his famous condemnation of the ills of institutionalized learning.

Illich believed there were two kinds of institutions: bureaucratic or technocratic, and convivial. The first, like highways and universities, were the province of a wealthy elite, car owners and people with the money for an advanced education. These institutions had a self-replicating and increasingly entangling logic. Highways encouraged people and society to normalize their lives and jobs around their cars, resulting in more cars and highways and regulation. Advanced education, similarly, established itself as the linchpin for a whole society by becoming the gatekeeper and primary authority on all
kinds of knowledge, making costly and obscure the kind of information (for instance, basic medical information) that should be available to anyone with an interest in it or a knack for it.

In contrast, convivial institutions, like local roads or the post office, are genuinely public and open to all. Pedestrians, bicycle riders, and joggers can all find room for themselves on Maple Avenue. Likewise, the postal service is available to anyone with change for a stamp. Learning, Illich believed, should take place only through such institutions. Exchanges needed to be set up where a person could find a teacher for what he or she wanted to know. Education cooperatives, where students were matched with teachers, would replace schools, where bureaucrats possessed the authority to define learning for everyone else. And everyone, no matter their age or certification, would be both student and teacher. In Illich’s scheme, individuals would start out with a small number of credits to spend on lessons, but to earn more credits they’d have to do some teaching themselves.

Even Unions Have Bay Windows

A persuasive kernel of common sense, in many cases, lay hidden inside Illich’s wild-eyed notions: that students learn a great deal from their peers; that educated people teach themselves or otherwise discover, outside the classroom, many of their most important lessons; that advanced education indoctrinates individuals, teaching them a kind of professional code and knowledge for work that can be addressed in a frank manner using plain facts and everyday language. Another insight of Illich’s was that learning works best when it is driven by the needs and desires of the individual student, not the self-interested claims of the bureaucracy. A large number of today’s antibureaucratic conservatives would agree with some or even all of these propositions.

Illich followed his arguments wherever they led, including to qualified support of free-market reforms. He approvingly cites Milton Friedman’s work on vouchers, which he calls “a logical way of cutting the budget and, one hopes, of increasing benefits.” But vouchers would not, in Illich’s view, offer poor children those benefits that truly set middle-class children apart: the conversation of educated people, books in the home, travel. Vouchers that had to be spent on schooling, Illich complained, would play into the hands of “racists, promoters of religious schools, and others whose interests are socially divisive.” Above all, Illich wanted “the return of initiative and accountability for learning to the learner or his most immediate tutor.”

Illich even took on Lyndon Johnson’s new federal education program, Title I, then the new cure for education woes. “It is the most expensive compensatory program ever attempted anywhere in education,” he wrote, voicing complaints that sound similar to those made by critics of “adequacy” lawsuits today, “yet no significant improvement can be detected in the learning of these ‘disadvantaged’ children. Compared with their classmates from middle-income homes, they have fallen further behind. Moreover, in the course of this program, professionals discovered an additional ten million children laboring under economic and educational handicaps. More reasons for claiming more federal funds are now at hand.”

The New Left’s radical antibureaucratic critique helped make it conventional for establishment liberals to support reforms that promised to address, in Christopher Jencks’s words, “the bureaucracy problem.” In a 1966 essay for the Public Interest on “slum schools,” Jencks sounded as if he might have been channeling Goodman as he castigated the absurd logic of school bureaucracy. The system, he wrote, was burdened by “monitoring,” “endless forms,” and “constant tests and elaborate regulations for students.” And its hierarchical system was a self-perpetuating con. “The student tries to dope out what the teacher wants, and gives it to him…. The teachers, in turn, try to figure out what the principal wants…. The principal, in turn, tries to keep the central administration happy (and the administration tries to keep the school board happy).” The result? “Organizational sclerosis.”

The case against bureaucracy was already being made by Leftist organizations like Students for a Democratic Society
(SDS, the vanguard of the New Left), whose 1962 Port Huron Statement is a broad humanist argument against organizational life. Calling for something to be done “to change our circumstances in the school, the workplaces, the bureaucracies, the government” and insisting on man’s “unrealized potential for self-cultivation and self-direction,” the statement issued a challenge to modern society built on a critique that had begun six years earlier with William Whyte’s The Organization Man. Even the unions have failed, complained SDS, to promote the progressive agenda, proving themselves vulnerable to the temptations of bourgeois materialism: “Today even the House of Labor has bay windows.”

How to Become a Teacher of Retraining

The guiding intellectual light to many of these New Leftists, including Illich himself, was Paul Goodman. Like Illich, with whom he was friendly, Goodman had a soft spot for vouchers, though he too insisted that the definition of educational activity first be widely expanded. “I would suggest,” he wrote in Compulsory Miseducation, his polemic against universal public education, “that, on the model of the GI-Bill, we experiment, giving the school money directly to the high-school-age adolescents, for any plausible self-chosen education proposals, such as purposeful travel or individual enterprise. This would also, of course, lead to the proliferation of experimental schools.” No friend of the teachers unions, Goodman also pushed for more liberal credentialing: “Use appropriate unlicensed adults of the community—the druggist, the storekeeper, the mechanic—as the proper education of the young into the grown-up world.”

Like Illich, who was radicalized while helping New York City’s poor, Goodman drew on his experience in the city’s public schools. He visited and observed schools and classrooms at the behest of the school board to study the system’s counterproductive tendencies. Worthwhile pedagogical innovations, he observed, could occur only on a small scale. If an innovation required money, the bureaucrats demanded it be undertaken on a large scale, to make it worth the investment, explained Goodman—and thus undermined any chance of its success. To capture the illogic of bureaucratic attempts to keep pace with reality, Goodman quotes a Department of Labor employee who was dealing with the problem of training people for specific jobs. “We retrain him, but before the course is finished, the job too has vanished. So we begin again. But after the fourth or fifth retraining, he has a job that doesn’t vanish: he becomes a Teacher of Retraining.”

Hero to Disaffected Youth

In debating education reform, Goodman adopted not the point of view of The System, even less that of society or the nation (in one recurring riff, he savagely criticizes James Conant, Harvard president and education reformer, for even mentioning “national needs” alongside “individual development”), but that of the dropout, The System’s rejects. With the popular success of Growing Up Absurd, Goodman had become a hero to radicals 30 years his junior. It was among the new generation of university radicals that his call to resist The System found its greatest resonance.

As Goodman took up the cause of troubled youth, the gripes of the beatnik, the delinquent, and the dropout became his own gripes. That there were young people, especially young men, who dropped out of school to become full-time delinquents fatally undermined The System’s moral credibility and political legitimacy for Goodman. As he wrote in Growing Up Absurd: “The problem is not to get [delinquent youths] to belong to society, for they belong a priori by being the next generation. The burden of proof and performance is quite the other way.”

Goodman argued, like many of today’s antibureaucrats, that the noneducation burdens placed on schools made it harder to accomplish their primary purpose: education. He complained of increasing class sizes, which were the result of compulsory universal education, while arguing that real teaching could take place only on a small scale and not in situations where a teacher’s first responsibility was crowd control. But Goodman didn’t stop there: “In the organizational plan,” meaning modern bureaucratic society, he believed schools acted as both a babysitting service and “an arm of the police, providing cops and concentration camps,” paid for with public funds.
It was as if the Left had, for the first time, discovered that the state played an important role in the socialization of the nation’s children. This revelation, combined with the rebellion against the modern bureaucratic way of life, led logically to a critique of the public schools as unnatural, soul deadening, curiosity killing, and productive primarily of “square,” hollowed-out yes-men. “It is in the schools and from the mass media,” wrote Goodman, “that the mass of our citizens in all classes learn that life is inevitably routine, depersonalized, venally graded.”

Some Hard Realities
Goodman’s and Illich’s thoughts about racial equality were tempered by their distrust of the bureaucracy. Both men avoided the question of civil rights for the obvious reason that the aims of the civil rights movement, to guarantee blacks an equal share of what The System had to offer, were inconsistent with the goal of undermining The System. In fact, like many other hipster intellectuals, Marshall McLuhan for instance, Illich and Goodman appeared to believe blacks’ social disenfranchisement, to some extent, preserved them from The System’s dehumanizing encroachments. Like much of the New Left, the antibureaucrats were more enthralled by the Black Power movement than by the non-violent, explicitly Christian, civil rights movement.

The ideas that made these intellectuals quite radical and, not coincidentally, exciting, also minimized the likelihood that their utopian visions would become reality. In *The Greening of America* (1970), Charles Reich, then a Yale professor who “found himself” in the hippie culture of his students, was so confident that the institutions Illich and Goodman complained about needed replacing that he treated their decline as inevitable.

“What is the machinery we rely upon to turn our wishes into realities?” asked Reich, a onetime Supreme Court clerk, in the opening of *Greening*. “Could it be that the American crisis results from a structure that is obsolete? All the other machinery we use becomes obsolete in a short time. A social institution, which is, after all, only another type of machinery, is not necessarily immune from the same laws of obsolescence.”

In retrospect, the antagonism of Illich and Goodman to commonplace public institutions seems subtle and discriminating next to Reich’s account in which the public and the private, governmental and the corporate, have all blended seamlessly to deprive human beings of their personal dignity. “Beginning with school, if not before, an individual is systematically stripped of his imagination, his creativity, his heritage, his dreams, and his personal uniqueness in order to style him into a productive unit for a mass technological society.”

And Then It Was Gone
The movement’s hostility to mainstream, “bourgeois” values and the institutions of American society and government never endeared it to more conservative, older generations. Nor did it impress the politicians and parents, who began again, in the 1970s, when standardized test scores were falling, to emphasize the basics in their calls for education reform. The whole Vietnam era, in which whiz-kid organization men like Robert McNamara seemed to represent all that was wrong with the world, began to wind down as public debate focused on how the United States would ultimately withdraw from Southeast Asia.

If the 1960s were a period in which a surprising number of intelligent people looked forward to the demolition of mainstream institutions like the school system, then the 1970s proved to be a time of organization rebuilding. Novel ideas like deschooling and open classrooms slowly faded from the scene, while union rolls and political clout soared. “By the mid-1970s,” wrote Diane Ravitch in *The Troubled Crusade*, “both the AFT and the NEA had become major powers, not only in their school districts but in state legislatures and in the nation.” The election of Jimmy Carter resulted in the creation of the Department of Education in 1979. The System was thriving.

Still, the promise of education as a lever for social change encouraged many Leftists to become teachers and administrators, in essence, bureaucrats. Bill Ayers, for instance, went from Cleveland alternative schools to the Days of Rage in 1968 Chicago to the bombing of the Capitol to professor of education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. (Schools of education are among the only places today where one
might encounter people who read Illich and Goodman.) Ayers supports smaller schools that would be more sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of local communities, believing they offer the best prospect for addressing “the inequitable distribution of educational resources” and “the capacity of a range of self-interested bureaucracies to work against the common good.”

Another radical who took up education as part of his commitment to the cause of social justice was Howard Fuller, who directs the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University. In Fuller’s hands the antibureaucratic rhetoric has been fine-tuned. No longer is The System attacked as a system. Rather, like other antibureaucrats on the Left, Fuller faults the bureaucracy for preserving the social and education disadvantages of poor and minority students. Thus does he eloquently recast the antibureaucratic case as an extension of the civil rights movement, in which Illich and Goodman had stood on the sidelines.

“When did we sit down at a lunch counter at Woolworth’s in Greensboro, North Carolina, February 1, 1960, to arrive at another lunch counter today where we are welcome but we can’t read the menu?” So said Fuller, who is also the founder of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, at a 2001 BAEO conference. A supporter of vouchers and charter schools, Fuller is no more a friend of the unions than were Paul Goodman or any of the other 1960s antibureaucratic liberals. “Vouchers,” Fuller said a few years back, “represent a fundamental change in the way public schools are governed and financed, and the people who stand to lose power aren’t ever going to say, ‘Oh, fine.’”

But it is not merely among graying radicals that the ideas of the antibureaucratic Left live on. In addition to being visible in the policy briefs and arguments of the antibureaucratic Right, the ideas of Illich and Goodman are being rediscovered on the Left by a younger generation of educators and education scholars. Not surprisingly, many antibureaucratic concepts come to them through the filter of multiculturalism and postmodernism. In any case, their concern for social justice has led them to question whether the bureaucracy’s agenda is consistent with the needs of students.

In an essay titled “School Choice through a Foucauldian Lens,” published last year, Stacy Smith, a professor of education at Bates College, seized on the ideas of Michel Foucault to dispute the notion that supporting charter schools means supporting market-based education reforms. Describing her own perspective on the charter school debate, Smith writes, “I consider myself a member of the Left in relation to public education because I am concerned with ends of social justice such as equality and fairness; I am also concerned that institutions of public education be governed democratically and that they prepare young people for democratic public life.”

Smith’s essay was published last year in The Emancipatory Promise of Charter Schools: Toward a Progressive Politics of School Choice. The editors of this volume, Eric Rofes and Lisa M. Stulberg, junior professors at Humboldt State University and New York University respectively, are “two progressive scholars” who “intend for this volume to serve as a challenge to many of [their] senior colleagues.” They align themselves with “a longstanding practice among the education Left of faulting bureaucratic organization of public education” for supporting “social inequalities.” At the same time, they fault fellow education Leftists for “opposing innovative efforts to transform the organization of public education and the governance of schooling.”

The language may have changed, but once again antibureaucratic liberalism is placing the education goal of raising the life prospects of students ahead of the interests of an education system that is assumed to be healthy as long as it is growing in size and responsibility. At its best, the antibureaucratic Left was brave enough to exalt individual promise at the expense of the bureaucracy. And the new generation is hoping that the school-choice movement will advance this same goal. Next thing you know, these liberals will be reading Milton Friedman.

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