



The Lost Common Good of Education

As parents send their kids back to school, Joe Woodard argues the real classroom risk is an outmoded pedagogical revolution that turned education against its true nature.

Joe Woodard

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At the risk of sounding melodramatic: a revolutionary elite seized public education in the 1970s. I saw it during my time at the University of Alberta. It was *not* a “conspiracy.” It was an ideology – “politics masquerading as science” – the proselytizing of a dogmatic new religion among ambitious academics. This new faith is Rousseau’s vision of the “Noble Savage” or “Child of Nature.” Its promise and purpose: all we need for a glorious new Heaven-on-Earth is to tear down all authority. Destroy the Oppression of the Past, and that will “let a thousand flowers bloom.” Like all revolutions, *only* the revolutionary elites have benefited from this.

Now, the *natural* purpose or *telos* of education is to prepare children for the world, the challenging, fulfilling and sometimes scary world of adults. Parents and educators must “lead out” (*educare*) children, out from a secure and helpless dependency within their families into competent and responsible adulthood. In this way, the new generation can contribute happily to their own families, community and country.

Since we are all born at a particular time and place, we must all learn to speak its language and navigate all its norms – family and dietary norms, commercial, civic and political norms, artistic norms, and most importantly its calendar of public festivals. Because *anthropos zoon politikon*, because humans are political animals, because we need each other so deeply, our language and cultural norms are the very air we breathe, tools we use and feasts we make merry together. This is our Common Good, the frame and substance of our shared happiness.

So, for over 3,000 years, every civilization worldwide – in China, the Mediterranean, India – has been handed on by a Pedagogy of Community or Virtue. This the Greeks called *paideia*: training in its mores, etiquette, practical skills, artistic tastes and popular pieties. Each culture has its

peculiar understanding of courage, self-control, justice and respect, foundational virtues that we all must share, because we live happily only when living together. This is our Common Good.

Our Common Good is not intolerance. It is not oppression. Children's education in their native culture is real empowerment, real belonging and real happiness. The alternative, the attempt to build a norm-free society of self-expressive individuals – the ideology of celebrity, where “everyone is special” – is a recipe for loneliness, meaninglessness, aimlessness, despair.

Nevertheless, just 50 years ago, following the late 1960s Summer of Love, Paris riots and Woodstock, an unannounced, unadvertised revolution began seizing the land. It was not a violent military uprising. No armed guerillas seized the radio stations. It was a cultural revolution. Professors and bureaucrats (many of them *Woodstock wannabes*) seized the corridors of the university faculties of education. This revolution replaced the age-old Pedagogy of Community with a utopian Pedagogy of Liberation.

This new *theory* asserts that humanity, freed by modern technology, no longer needs any moral code. We can all now do whatever we *feel*. It is not a new norm. It rejects the need for shared norms. The universal understanding of happiness as a reward for good habits, competence and responsibility was overthrown by a Postmodern, Neo-Marxist theory of happiness as the product of personal discovery and self-expression.

This was never an issue simply left-right partisan politics in a democratic regime. It was the authoritarian imposition by academics of a new, destructive anthropology. Neo-Marxists never appreciated that cultural norms are the very vocabulary of our shared life together. Instead, the Pedagogy of Liberation teaches helpless children that their native culture is their oppressor, their enemy.

No surprise, then, that young students are overwhelmed by hobgoblins of their helplessness. They swallow every catastrophe de jour, march with placards demanding their demands, and fall like lemmings into epidemic anxiety disorders and depression: substance abuse, cutting for girls, suicide for boys, life on the street and public dependency. The simple, undeniable fact is that in an age of unprecedented prosperity and opportunity, our children are drowning in *anomie*, purposeless solitude.

This Pedagogy of Liberation was introduced into public education by Postmoderns like Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1968) and Ivan Illich (*Deschooling Society*, 1971). Their “critical pedagogy” condemned what Freire called the “banking model of education,” an emphasis on useful skills. It condemned good habits – “conformity” – as the suppression of creativity. Simply tearing down our existing culture, they believed, would unleash the creativity and spontaneous cooperation of the next generation. Then the experts rediscovered Herbert Marcuse's 1955 *Eros and Civilization*, devoted to grounding economic socialism in sexual liberation. Since modern industry has solved “all questions of material existence,” Marcuse argued, “moral commands and prohibitions are no longer relevant.” Freed from economic need, even children could now explore the vast and sundry varieties of sexual intercourse.

In fairness, there was some justification for the 1960s Postmodern reaction – though, like most reactions, it magnified the problem. Four generations earlier (1880-1910), University of Chicago president and psychologist John Dewey had launched the Pragmatic or Modern revolution in pedagogy, heralding the first Reign of Experts. Back then, what we understand as uniform public education (versus grass-rooted local schools) was really only 20 or 30 years old.

With public tax revenues now feeding standardized schooling, Dewey argued that a democratic citizenry needed only practical skills, rather than poetic or cultural education. Running the government could be left largely to the experts (such as political scientist Woodrow Wilson), while highly-skilled citizens got on with the 9-to-5 job of building the economy. In their spare time, citizens might shop amid whatever culture was generated by entertainment providers. This respected their autonomy as free, democratic citizens. And by 1910, *Dewey's psychology was required reading in Canadian teachers colleges.*

The 1900 revolution “liberated” children no more than the later 1970 revolution. It assumed that citizens educated in a trade (like welding or dentistry) would go home in the evening to pick up Donne, Mozart, Montesquieu or Canaletto. It ignored the archetypal importance of our cultural norms, the *res publica* – such as the Plutarch and Monmouth that Shakespeare, “the whining school-boy,” learned in Stratford’s little parish school. Deweyism trained children in trades (even math and physics now trades), while ignoring kids’ *inevitable* need for cultural icons.

So its implicit adult archetype became the highly-skilled Philistine. Contrast the icons of Lucy Maude Montgomery or Young Lincoln, nurtured on Shakespeare and the Bible, with the later Ford CEO and US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, the classic soulless technocrat. By the 1960s, memorizing poetry was passé.

In the generation after Dewey, anxiety grew in some circles about the official erosion of our cultural vocabulary and archetypes. John Erskine founded the General Studies at Columbia, and Robert Maynard Hutchins (Dewey’s successor at Chicago) published *Higher Learning in America* (1937).

Hutchins warned that the West faced a tragedy – “vocationalism, empiricism and disorder” – unless it returned to the liberal arts, the “single-minded pursuit of intellectual virtue and truth for its own sake.” This seeded the small but enduring Great Books or Liberal Arts movement: teachers such as Charles Van Doran, Mortimer Adler, John Senior and Jacques Barzun, and small, vibrant colleges like Hillsdale, St. John’s Annapolis, and Thomas Aquinas Ojai.

At that point, the liberal arts movement was simply a tiny, remedial effort, trying to back-fill at the college-level the eroding cultural education or *paideia*, needed by all students in high school. But the movement lay dormant during the Great Depression and Second World War, both of which seemed to validate the need for Dewey technocrats. In the post-war university boom, veteran students justifiably sought high-level skills in a new, complex economy. But they needed to have gotten their *paideia* in high school.

Until 1968, few parents realized the deepening cultural ignorance and historical amnesia among educators themselves. Come the third generation post-Dewey, technocratic educators assumed that education was all a technology, just like biology, and therefore subject to the Iron Law of Progress. So they saw no need to educate themselves in the pedagogical cultural canon (e.g., Plato's *Republic*). Ignoring the cautionary tales of the high-tech Nazis and Stalinists, they trusted entirely in teaching techniques like "scope and sequence" for "skill delivery." However – *spoiler alert* – the Great Books movement did not vanish. Eighty years later, it has now graduated – cavalry to the rescue – a critical mass of educated young teachers, intentionally nurturing the charter school movement, addressing new parental demands for real *paideia*.

So yes, there was some cause for the post-1968 Postmodern reaction to Modern education. The Pedagogy of Community, the commitment to a cultural Common Good and shared virtue, had already been undermined by a Pedagogy of Skills, icons defined by the marketplace. For three generations, public education itself had eroded our behavioral norms, artistic tastes and popular pieties, in celebrating the Technocrat as the ascendant cultural archetype. Liberationists like Freire rightly objected to the commercial atomization of social solidarity by "the banking model of education." Yet tragically, they swallowed the technocratic faith in Progress, an irreversible Progress of Freedom. They aggravated the public isolation of children with a self-contradictory icon of happiness: unfettered, solipsistic self-expression.

The Pedagogues of Liberation recognized the erosion of the communal culture under the Pedagogy of Skills. Not entirely their own fault, they were already too badly educated, too resentful, too enamored with technological progress or maybe just too lazy even to want to recover their own cultural roots. Their ideology now tells them that their heritage is a cruel parade of injustice, so they're unequipped to question the smug provenance of the ideas feeding their own ideology – what Julien Benda called *The Treason of the Academics* (1920). They may realize that Dewey was parroting the highly questionable John Locke, 250 years prior, but they blindly adopt Rousseau's 200-year-old cartoon of the "Noble Savage" – a cultural icon whose model of happiness is shallow, unconscious contentment. Moderns sat atop a 2,500-year-old olive tree and snipped the blossoms, hoping to get more fruit. Postmoderns, enraged at the pruning, hack at their own limbs, expecting new flowers to sprout in the fallen mulch.

Joe Woodard earned a PhD in Political Theory at Claremont, then spent 10 years as an academic (Brock, UCSB, USCCR, Bethany), 15 as a journalist (Alberta Report, Calgary Herald), and 11 as a Canadian federal tribunal judge (EI, Citizenship). He helped his wife Kathy raise their 10 children, many now married (nine grandchildren and counting).

Part Two of his essay tomorrow...

Regaining Lost Educational Ground

In part two of his essay on the catastrophe of revolutionary pedagogy, Joe Woodard foresees independent schools and parental choice returning education to its natural purpose.

Joe Woodard

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University arts students of the 1970s all saw Marxism dominating the world of academic respectability among ambitious young scholars – the Herd of Independent Thinkers – despite Communism’s repeated seven-and eight-figure slaughters (such as Stalin’s four to seven million Holodomor dead, Mao’s 30 to 50 million Great Leap Forward dead, and Pol Pot’s more modest two million Killing Fields dead). But the bloom started coming off the Marxist rose in 1968, when Soviet tanks crushed the short-lived Czech democracy. The glorious Prague Spring had enjoyed rock festivals in the city squares, and the Young Left here could not abide anyone censoring their music.

Post-1968, Soviet Marxism was now no longer chic for utopian socialists, so they needed a new ideological warrant. Again, a fallback was already prepared by Herbert Marcuse in his 1955 *Eros and Civilization*. Once a pariah among real revolutionaries, Marcuse’s Neo-Marxism became a hit, post-Woodstock, by grounding utopian economic socialism in sexual liberation. Since technology has solved "all questions of material existence, moral commands and prohibitions are no longer relevant." Liberated from necessity, human beings can now explore the vast and sundry options of experimental intercourse. Etiquette was apparently thought unnecessary in negotiating the experiments, hence the date-rape alarm now prevalent on campuses.

Marcuse was followed by a flood of contending critical philosophers, particularly Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Jean Francois Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* (1978) was in fact commissioned by the Conseil des universités du Québec, to address the question, *What Next?* (Ponder that conceit!) They disagreed how the future would look, but all agreed that the destruction or “deconstruction” of all existing norms and social order would spontaneously bring something infinitely better. In this assumption, post-war intellectuals were astonishingly oblivious to the immense effort, self-sacrifice and cooperation that had been needed, generation after generation over the previous three millennia, to give them their warm university offices, soft academic chairs, and freedom to complain about their oppression. They were strangers to any gratitude for life.

Neo-Marxists had a revolutionary aggression toward “reactionary” perspectives and real evidence, so they employed all the weapons of academic warfare: journal censorship, career-blocking, reputation-smearing and open mockery. By the 1980s, they had a lock on education faculties across the land. Testing experts who warned that the new Pedagogy was

creating a disaster in math, critical reasoning and language skills, now fell silent, fearing for their jobs.

With internal dissent suppressed, the vanguard agitated against testing as such, protesting that it was artificial and oppressive. Education's new mandarins announced, against all evidence (and ignored by our democratic representatives) that the new "discovery" methods achieved the traditional purpose of education better than the old "instructional" methods. But in reality, they were upending the purpose of education: not personal competence and social responsibility, but personal preoccupation and boundless self-expression. It was not science. It was ideology: *politics masquerading as science*.

Since the dawn of history, the world has understood that happiness arises in family and friendship, community and solidarity. Friendship means willing self-sacrifice, dedication, and self-control of our selfish appetites and angers. Kids must be taught good habits. They must learn to be friends, before they can have friends. They must learn to respect others, before they can earn respect. They must learn the discipline of an art, if they hope to be truly creative.

Likewise, three millennia of poetry, drama and pop music – from the *Iliad* to the Everly Brothers – testify that our sexuality is our least disciplined and potentially most destructive passion. Yet Postmodern Gender-Marxists insist everyone will find happiness by stoking a blistering flame.

There are always some who try to live like this – dozens of dead young rock stars in the Sixties – but in 2,500 years of human reflection, no one, not even the Epicureans, ever seriously proposed such an adolescent, self-destructive theory of happiness as our cultural norm and Common Good — not until Marcuse, Foucault, Derrida. They all sang along with John Lennon: "Imagine there's no countries... Imagine there's no purpose... Imagine we can get whatever we want, just by imagining."

Into the new millennium, the growing obsession of the new pedagogues with *sexual* liberation – the War on Innocence – has been disastrous for our kids' intellectual achievement. Psychologists once defended, but now ignore, Freud's discovery of the "sexual latency period." This is important. From late-toddlerhood to early adolescence, a child's brain becomes a veritable sponge, soaking up reading, writing, arithmetic, music, history, science and poetry in *colossal* amounts — *provided* they're undisturbed by precocious sexual stimulation. The enormous cultural achievements of China, Persia and the West arose from family solidarity in preserving childhood chastity. Today, single-sex classrooms still *prove* the academic benefits of keeping kids innocent for as long as possible. And, for troubled kids, scholarly achievement has always been their one real hope for outgrowing their emotional issues – intellectual growth being *real* liberation. But now, the deliberate, institutional sexualization of pre-pubescent kids magnifies all the fixations of liberation and self-esteem – at the expense of their thinking.

To repeat, the education revolution was not a normal tug-of-war between Left and Right within a democratic constitutional order. Neither has it been a conspiracy. It is a New Faith, proselytizing

a new anthropology and vision of Nirvana. The superstition of the Noble Savage and Child of Nature was encapsulated in a policies of childhood sexual liberation.

The policy has required that otherwise busy parents be locked out of the schools, lest they stumble on what really happens in the toilet stalls and shower rooms. But it has *never* been a conspiracy. School administrators publicly insist on the necessity of blanket inoculation of HPV vaccines. Socialist premiers and education ministers “from sea to shining sea” publicly demand that parents be locked out of the “guidance counselling” of their own kids, so the teachers can foster sexual exploration among immature adolescents. Educators have openly preached what they believe. Perhaps parents failed to notice – or failed to take them seriously.

Now, however, families are voting with their feet. The counter-revolution began quietly in the 1980s with commercial tutoring services and cultural home-schooling. By the 1990s, parents were deliberately choosing language immersion schools for their tighter discipline, and charter schools were reinstating the Pedagogy of Virtue under the guise of specialty education. By the 2000s, savvy school trustees had instituted Edmonton’s Cogito schools and Calgary’s Traditional Learning Centres – highly popular with immigrant families, accustomed to schools back home with fewer computers but better teaching.

Whenever discerning parents can jump the Wall, they do, so charter schools have enormous waiting lists. Calgary’s Foundations for the Future Charter Academy, with 3,500 desks, has a 13,000-name waiting list. The American “Western Civ” charter schools are exploding with franchises like the Chesterton Academies, Great Hearts, Basis, Nashville Dominican and Barney Schools, and the sparks are reaching Canada. Yet the Empire’s response is: Build the Wall Higher. Post-Modern “imagining” can’t survive a collision with “capital-R” Reality. Maybe only 10 per cent of kids will ever find a spot in a charter or independent “Western Civ” school, but the results will publicly embarrass the liberationist mythology.

The educational establishment seized onto a spectacularly flawed theory of human happiness, then usurped the authority to experiment on other people’s children, with other people’s tax dollars. Whatever the history of minority groups, the problem of the last two generations was never the bullying of ethnic, indigenous, gay or transgendered students.

If bullying were the issue, bureaucrats would worry much more about the bullying of obese students – though obesity isn’t sexy. If student suffering were the issue, they’d be in a panic about cell-phone addiction and middle-school Facebook bullying. But public educators refuse to acknowledge the responsibility of their liberation ideology in our epidemic anxiety disorders and depression. Like addicts to anything, they believe that “more of the same” will cure their disease or discontent.

The real issue in the Pedagogy of Liberation is the theory of happiness as self-discovery, self-expression, self-esteem, self-satisfaction – self, self, self. This “liberation” is self-ism: historical ignorance, cultural ingratitude and public entitlement. Its results are loneliness, aimlessness and despair. The flight of families from the public system proves that it no longer meets education’s natural purpose: preparing children for competent, responsible adulthood. The

system must either return to a Pedagogy of Community, or watch its healthiest families flee to alternative schools, or become increasingly authoritarian in imposing its will on those families.

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