

Progressive pedagogy and political struggle

An idealist dream, an impossible fiction or something to hope and struggle for? I would like to explore some of the problems and possibilities for and with progressivism as pedagogic mode and political strategy. I shall tend to make reference to primary school pedagogy because that's what I'm most familiar with, but I hope that these remarks will be relevant to all sections of the education system and to our own practice as teachers in higher and further education.

In 1968 I became a primary school teacher. I was swayed by the romantic promise of progressivism in education, and I linked poverty and inner-city decay with the terrible regimentation and the 'old-fashioned' repressive and silencing methods. I had read Herbert Kohl's *Thirty Six Children*¹ and John Holt's *How Children Fail*,² and I loved my inner-city children with a fierce passion. For under my nurturance their illiteracy would be converted into inner-city poetry. There was joy in my classroom. There were also terrible problems: how to control the children, for example. And four o'clock frequently found me sobbing quietly at my desk, behind the shut door where none of the old, strict teachers, who didn't like my ways, could see me.

Clearly, difficult as it all was, the dream of something different was at that moment very important. But since then the libertarianism upon which the progressivism of the sixties was founded has been re-examined. This libertarianism was crucial in locating the 'personal' as a central aspect of the political, and particularly to developing a whole panoply of therapeutic interventions. However, alongside a concept of liberation as personal freeing was an understanding of power which located it as a fixed possession, in this case that of the oppressive – and consequently repressive – teacher. Personal liberty became synonymous with the lifting of that repression.

In response to these ideas I want to offer two arguments: first, that the concepts of power and liberation are intimately connected to the radical bourgeois project, the formation of the modern state and the modern concept of democratic government. I shall argue that the forms of pedagogy necessary to the maintenance of order, the regulation of populations, demand a self-regulating individual and a notion of freedom as freedom from overt control. Yet such a notion of freedom is a sham.

Secondly, the position of women as teachers (particularly in primary schools) is vital to the notion of freeing and liberation implied in such a pedagogy. It is love which will win the day, and it is the benevolent gaze of the teacher which will secure freedom from a cruel authority (in the family as well as the school). Through the figure of the maternal teacher the harsh power of the authoritarian father will be converted into the soft benevolence of the bourgeois mother. Hence, I will argue, aspects of women's sexuality are intimately bound up with the concept of progressivism. Just as women have argued that the sexual liberation of the sixties was a celebration of masculine sexuality, so I shall argue that the liberation of children conceived in these terms did not mean the liberation of women. In some ways, it actually served to keep women firmly entrenched as vital carers. Women teachers became caught, trapped inside a concept of nurturance which held them responsible for the freeing of each little individual, and therefore for the management of an idealist dream, an impossible fiction.

Critical to my analysis is a questioning of the concept of power employed in previous formulations. I want to suggest that instead of constructing a concept of power = authoritarianism and absence of power = helpful teacher, democratic relations, such formulations deny power. (I shall return to the concept of denial used in its psychoanalytic sense.) Instead, I shall use power in the Foucauldian sense of *power/knowledge*.³ It is in this sense that I want to raise problems for the concept of liberation as freedom from coercion, and to suggest that it is central to the concept of the bourgeois individual.

Foucault locates the transformation of governmental form, and therefore of the notion of power, as the shift from an overt sovereign power to a 'suspicious' and invisible power within those aspects of the sciences (particularly human sciences) which came to be used as the basis for what he calls technologies and apparatuses of social regulation. Basically, Foucault argues that the form of government depends not on authoritarianism but on normalization, the concept of a calculated, known population. In that sense a variety of governing practices – from medicine through law, to social welfare and schooling – began to be based on a concept of a norm, a normal individual.

In the nineteenth century science was used to calculate and produce a

knowledge of the population on an unprecedented scale. The production of 'knowledges' became intimately bound up with the devising of new techniques of population management. The school was the arena for the development of one set of techniques for 'disciplining' the population. The emergence of popular and then compulsory schooling related specifically to the problems of crime and poverty, understood as characteristic of the population: criminality and pauperism.¹ Schooling was seen as one way to ensure the development of 'good habits' which would therefore alleviate these twin problems. The original strategy was to engage children in ceaseless activity, with constant surveillance to ensure these habits. Subsequently, this strategy was abandoned in the face of children's ability in rote-learning, 'to recite the Lord's Prayer for a half-penny', without actually assuming the rigid moral habits.

It was at this point that the kind of pedagogy which had been advocated in terms of overt authority began to be challenged. There were many examples of such challenges, from the work of Froebel and Pestalozzi, to Robert Owen and his school in the New Lanark Mills, to Itard and Seguin in France (whom Maria Montessori followed).⁵ In their differing ways they began to advocate an education 'according to nature'.

Here 'nature' was defined in a number of ways, but most of those which are important to the inception of psychology involve a sense of 'species-being' derived from evolutionary biology. Thus, in these cases 'education according to nature' came to mean according to the science of human nature. The critical feature here was a sense of evolution and heredity, an environment understood in quasi-biological terms. Their 'interaction' varied in different theories, but was rarely stated differently.⁶

This human nature was mapped out in the Child Study Societies which flooded the land. The calculation of the distinct qualities and characteristics of children followed many attempts to link ontogeny to phylogeny – the individual's development to that of the species – the most famous of which is Darwin's study of his infant son.⁷ This classification of children proceeded in the same way as the animal/human distinction was being monitored in the Empire. The categorization of children according to the ontogenetic characteristics of their natures was similarly based on certain assumptions about the civilizing process and the place in it of 'a natural environment'.⁸

Education according to nature became the way of ensuring a natural path of development, the best kind of civilizing process.⁹ Theories of instincts and animality were thus connected to the regulation of the population, many of whom (particularly the urban proletariat) displayed all too obvious signs of animal passions.¹⁰ Degeneracy was seen as an

aberration of nature.¹¹ The part played by the environment was made clear by the mapping of the city – the spread of typhoid, its criminal quarters, and so forth. The environment too could be watched, monitored and transformed.

I am glossing over a great deal of political struggle, but my aim is to demonstrate that the advent of naturalism – that is, the ensuring of a correct passage from animal infant to civilized adult – became understood as both ‘progressive’ (according to scientific principles) and effective. It would prevent the threatened rebellion *precisely because* children who were not coerced would not need to rebel – the lessons would be learned, and this time properly. Docile bodies would become a self-disciplined workforce.

What was proposed was a process – a scientific process – whereby the schoolroom could become a laboratory where development could be watched, monitored and set along the right path. There was therefore no need for lessons, no discipline of the overt kind. Power became that of the possessor of the Word, of rationality, of scientific concepts – reason’s mastery over the emotions. This would ensure a stable populace and rebellion would therefore be eradicated by natural means. Interference was limited and surveillance was everywhere. The ultimate irony is that the child supposedly freed by this process to develop according to its nature was the most classified, catalogued, watched and monitored in history. Freed from coercion, the child was much more subtly regulated into normality.

These new concepts created ‘the child’ as the object of calculation and pedagogic practice. For example, ‘language’ became that standard presented in reading books created especially for the child. Using concepts derived from Etienne Balibar’s examination of the French language,¹² Jacqueline Rose argues¹³ that the construction of a unified nation required the production of reading material *for children*. What we now think of as ‘natural language’ was produced specifically as a special text stripped of the literary style of the educated aristocracy of the time. In that sense, uniformity (natural language) was created out of diversity – a wide variety of dialects, for example – and made the object of those texts used in compulsory schooling. In this way a standard – an educated standard – was produced, with the consequent pathologization of difference as deviance from that standard. (In a similar vein, Keith Hoskin¹⁴ traces the way in which the development of silent reading transformed a system of oral recitation, and particularly facilitated the development of examinations as written work in silence, thus making the mass testing and normalization of the population possible.)

At the very moment when nature was introduced into pedagogy, the shift to covert surveillance became enshrined in a word – ‘love’. ‘Love’

was to facilitate the development of the child in a proper supportive environment. This shift is coterminous with, and related to, another – the entry of women into elementary school teaching. The emerging human sciences, building upon previous philosophical tenets, had deemed women's bodies unfit for reason, for intellectual activity. The possession of a womb was thought to render a woman unfit for deep thought, which might tax her reproductive powers or make her less amenable to rearing children. Given the state of Empire, the concern with the race as with the species, it was considered potentially injurious to allow bourgeois women to reason.

Nevertheless, women's struggles to enter higher education were finally successful when elementary teacher training was opened to them. Frances Widdowson argues that the development of teacher training colleges went together with the concern to educate women.¹⁵ Such a concern was not a reversal of the brain/womb polarity – precisely its opposite. Women were to be educated, in the words of the 1933 Hadow Report,¹⁶ to 'amplify their capacities for maternal nurturance'. These capacities, while given naturally, could be enhanced so that women teachers could provide a quasi-maternal nurturance to compensate for the deprived environments of the poor. In addition, women could watch, monitor and map the child's development. Clipboard in hand, these scientific educators could survey each of their small charges, whose development was entrusted to their love.

It was always an impossible fiction. The dream of ensuring each child's pathway to reason turned the schoolroom, where pupils recited their lessons and moved up the form, into the classroom,¹⁷ a place in which each child was considered separately. Discipline became not overt disciplining but covert watching. Regurgitated facts became acquired concepts. Knowledge became naturalized as structure or process. Teachers began to talk about 'learning *how* to learn', the surest guarantor of correct rationality. The old ways had to be outlawed to make room for natural reason. Children therefore weren't taught facts but were left alone to interact with their environment. No more would there be the horror of child labour. Classroom work was replaced by play – the *proper* medium of expression for children, the most basic and animal-like medium of unconscious fantasies and the recapitulated development of the species.¹⁸ The classroom became the facilitating space for each individual, under the watchful and total gaze of the teacher, who was held responsible for the development of each individual. This assumed a total gaze, which could be stated, as one teacher put it, as 'knowing each child as an individual'. An impossible fiction.

THE PSYCHIC ECONOMY OF THE
PROGRESSIVE CLASSROOM

Let us imagine such a classroom. All has been transformed to make way for 'active learning', not 'passive regurgitating'. This pedagogic space is filled with groups of tables, not rows of desks. There may be no playtime, since work and play are indistinguishable, and work cards and individual assignments may have replaced textbooks. Children may choose their own timetables. Freedom is imagined. A whole fictional space is created, a fantasy-space in which the ideal nature, the most facilitating environment (rather like a greenhouse), is created in the classroom. Away from the decay of the inner city, the air in the classroom smells sweet. The teacher is no authoritarian father figure, but a bourgeois and nurturant mother. Here all can grow properly. In this greenhouse there will be no totalitarianism. It is the nursery and it nurtures, preventing the pent-up aggression leading to delinquency and war and fascism. The freedom of children is suggested by teachers who are not the oedipal father but the pre-oedipal mother, whose attachment to the children in her care, together with her total presence, ensures their psychic health.

The desire for happiness is a sentiment echoed throughout such classrooms (and deftly caught in Pat Holland's film *What are Schools For?*, where the children are allowed only happy sentiments and happy words: 'Wonderful, beautiful', coos the teacher). There is a denial of pain, of oppression (all of which seem to have been left outside the classroom door). There is also a denial of power, as though the helpful teacher didn't wield any (and indeed, we progressivists of the sixties believed we could be friends with children, be partners in learning – no power, no hierarchy, called by our first names).

The teacher is there to help, to enable, to facilitate. Only those children with a 'poor grasp of reality', those poor 'pathological' children, see her power. Because of their own authoritarian families, they react in a paranoid fashion to this nurturance – they are aggressive, they do not speak. They feel they are being watched, not nurtured.¹⁹ Who, one might ask, has not adapted to reality? A bourgeois reality where it is impossible to see the power invested in your charitable needs, where the poor and oppressed are transformed into the pathological and inadequate.

But more than this, the happy classroom is a place where passion is transformed into the safety of reason. Here independence and autonomy are fostered through the presence of the quasi-mother. There is no severance of this mother-child dyad except to autonomy.²⁰ This leaves the child in a fantasy of omnipotent control over the Other – the teacher. 'His' path to rationality, displayed best in mathematics, is a path to

omnipotent mastery over a calculable universe (outside time and space - a rationally ordered and controlled world²¹). Passion is superseded by an 'attraction to ideas', the 'love of the order and purity of mathematics'. Such power is immensely pleasurable. But whose universe is real?

Is it the universe outside time and space where there will be no war, no pain, no desire, no oppression?

At what cost the fantasy of liberation? I suggest that the cost is borne by the teacher, like the mother. She is passive to the child's active, she works to his play. She is the servant of the omnipotent child, whose needs she must meet at all times. Carolyn Steedman²² suggests that such a role mirrors not the aristocratic mother but the paid servant of the aristocracy, who is always there to service the children. His majesty the baby becomes his highness the child. The price of autonomy is woman. The price of intellectual labour (the symbolic play of the Logos) is its Other and opposite, work. Manual labour makes intellectual play possible. The servicing labour of women makes the child, the natural child, possible.

The education of working-class and black children is something of a problem, since they rarely conform to the ideal child. So too, the girl: is she to be a knower or a potential nurturer of knowers? What price her freedom? Although there is much to say about the education of girls and women, let me simply state that regulation of women's sexuality, rendering them fit only for maternal nurturance, is something which, as scholars like Lucy Bland have demonstrated,²³ pathologizes activity and passion. Needs replace desire. Affect replaces libido. Indeed, in progressivism girls are often held up as lacking: they seem to demonstrate either deviant activity or a passivity which means that they must be found lacking in reason and compensated for this lack. As I tried to show in Chapter 1, it is masculine sexuality, to the point of violence, which is validated by this pedagogy. It is the female teacher who is to *contain* this irrationality and to transform it into reason, where it can do no harm - a transformation which turns physical violence into the symbolic violence of mastery, the law. And in each case, the woman as container soaks up and contains the irrationality which she best understands.

The extent of validation of violence among boys is shocking in classrooms today, and the downplaying of this aggression in reasoned argument is itself an interesting transformation of power. Here it is the knower who can win and apparently topple the power of the teacher, through argument. Disciplining becomes knowing.

Although some have suggested that progressivism frees working-class children from harsh authoritarianism, I would suggest precisely the opposite. Progressivism makes the product of oppression, powerlessness, invisible. It is rendered invisible because within the naturalized discourse it is rendered 'unnatural', 'abnormal', 'pathological' - a state to be

corrected, because it threatens the psychic health of the social body. It is therefore very important to reassert the centrality of oppression and its transformation into a pathology in terms of a political analysis of the present social order. For example, what working-class mothers say to their children is either counted as nothing (it doesn't count as natural language in the deprivation literature) or romanticized and fetishized as the working-class culture of *Nippers* reading books, bingo and chips, the colourful banter of cockney market-traders. Even in the 'equal but different' model of working-class language displayed (differently) in the work of William Labov and Harold Rosen, for example,²⁴ the historical production of the 'natural' is completely elided. As Jacqueline Rose argues in *The Case of Peter Pan*, 'there is no natural language, especially for children'. Yet within the progressivists' nurturant welfare state, with its inadequate families aided by our latter-day charity, bourgeois culture is taken as nature.

Meanwhile, meanings are struggled over in the classroom. 'The Child' is created as a sign, to be read and calibrated within the pedagogic discourses regulating the classroom. The child is defined and mapped in its relations of similarity and difference with other signs: activity, experience, play rather than passivity, recitation, work, and so forth. Through the regulation of this pedagogy children become subjected in the classroom.²⁵ The classroom, then, is a site of struggle, not of an unproblematic fitting of these categories on to children but of a constantly erupting pathology, like the unconscious, breaking the smooth surface of the pedagogic discourse.

Many studies, of which the most famous is ORACLE,²⁶ have claimed that progressivism has never been tried in Britain, that most British classrooms are not child-centred, despite the orthodoxy. We are faced with children working, following the rules, trying to find out what to do – this despite the fact that there are taken to be no rules, only the pure joy of discovery. It often seems that the teachers produce the very categories that children are taken to be discovering. Children are bewildered because they don't know the rules, use strategies which aren't supposed to exist. Teachers turn out to be more traditional than expected and feel guilty because the future and 'freedom of our children for ever' is laid at their door. They are the guardians of an impossible dream, reason's dream of democratic harmony.

NOTES

1. Herbert Kohl, *Thirty Six Children*, Harmondsworth, Penguin 1971.
2. John Holt, *How Children Fail*, Harmondsworth, Pelican 1969.