

Preliminary Thoughts on Green Education

IF THE PURPOSE OF Green politics is to encourage and help create the conditions for ecological living on Earth, how would we describe the purpose, function, and daily routine of Green education? What would an elementary school, for instance, look like in a truly Green culture? I would like to wander, a little, in Green imagination in regard to schooling, but first I want to sketch the intellectual framework that gives shape and guidance to this wandering.

Once of the thinkers I most rely on is the late Lewis Mumford, probably the most prophetic of American historians. Mumford was an American, but he was a world historian whose grasp of historical dynamics was so deep that he was able to project—for instance in *The Pentagon of Power* (1970)—the incremental tightening of the “megamachine” noose in the late twentieth century. In other words, he anticipated our current disaster. Let me take a moment to sketch Mumford’s intellectual framework without, I hope, doing too great an injustice to its complexity.

In “Utopia, the City, and the Machine,” an essay reprinted in *Interpretations and Forecasts: 1922–1972*, Mumford says that a compulsion for utopian control, utopian perfection, is inherent in the earliest civilizations: “pyramid” regimes typified by armed and deadly elite control, institutional warfare, systemic slavery, the oppression and expropriation of agriculture, a drive to “conquer” nature, and the religious celebration of probing and controlling male intelligence. In *The Pentagon of Power*, Mumford shows exhaustively how political conquest and scientific ideology from roughly the fifteenth century onward coalesced in the “me-

gamachines” of the twentieth century, and how pervasively totalitarian and antinature these political megamachines really are.

The military, of course, is an ancient aspect of this totalitarian, pyramidal system. Two other aspects now infest our lives, our culture, and our consciousness, but it takes a historian with the depth of understanding of a Mumford to clearly identify them and to recognize their deadly megamachine features. These two aspects are the factory and the school; that is, the sort of social regimentation that *never occurred* in human culture until early civilization invented and imposed it—slavery and the military, in its most institutionalized formations—is now the norm of our everyday lives. Utopian civilization has simply saturated the world with its compulsory regimentation. Slavery is both mitigated and disguised by the wage system (therefore compulsion in the workplace has a nominally voluntary feature), but property and money make noncivilized subsistence virtually impossible, as Indian reservations demonstrate.

As with all complex patterns of thought and analysis, Green thinking has many gradations. “Helping the student learn about nature” has a Greenish tinge to it, and my limited exposure to contemporary curricula suggests there’s a fair amount of Green-around-the-gills instruction going on: global warming, glacier melting, species extinction—that sort of thing.

My purpose here is not to critique the scientific veracity of this teaching but to look, both explicitly and implicitly, at how the standard school system *embodies* the overbearing compulsory features of the megamachine and is the institutional vehicle in which and by which our children are trained, conditioned, and programmed to fit in with the utopian economic and military megamachine later in life. The school, despite elements of intellectual content to the contrary, is where we all were, and are, conditioned for utopia, just as the factory is where the near-perfect artifacts of utopia are fabricated, by alienated labor, for the utopian standard of living whose energy requirements have now generated a massive climate change over the very Earth on which we’ve evolved over hundreds of thousands of years. This is a feedback loop with an attitude.

I was raised on a small, first-generation homestead farm in north-central Wisconsin, a mile or two west of that river that has carried our state’s name and, thanks to paper mills, a sizeable quantity of our processed forests’ wastes. The garden, farm, and woods provided most of our food, all of our firewood. Our neighbors, the forest, and a nearby little river provided the bulk of our “entertainment.” I went to both one-room

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schools in the township—one room for all eight grades—and do not wish to idealize these schools, but there were features of one-room schools—the small size, the neighborhood proximity, the community function they served—that were good, desirable, and worth preserving. The teaching and curricula were, let's say, early utopian: already pointing in the direction of white-collar success, abstract knowledge, mindless routine and psychotic compulsion, almost totally indifferent toward farm life, rural culture, and the natural world right outside the windows.

With school consolidation in the early 1960s, and the coming of the computer messiah in the 1990s, these utopian characteristics have greatly deepened and become more totally normative, while the latent Green tendencies of the one-room schools, never adequately recognized and not at all protected, have almost disappeared from cultural consciousness. A school without yellow busses, a swimming pool, a principal, and an absolutely predictable routine is virtually unimaginable—a fantasy totally ungrounded in utopian “reality.”

So what would a Green school look like? The local district has a school forest and a school forest lodge. Lots of kids use the facility. Some classes get to stay overnight. And while I do not wish to disparage any school forest program or activity, I have yet to meet a student in or graduate of the local system who can go to the woods and easily identify tree types, wild flowers, bushes, bugs, or habitat—or, for that matter, hardly anyone who simply loves to wander in the forest.

I suspect the primary response to this observation is, largely, “So what?” This is a most marvelous place to begin a little intellectual spelunking, a little wiggling into and through the unacknowledged chasm between our loud and boastful emphasis on Science (with a capital S) and our almost total indifference to the actuality of the natural world that surrounds us. Science, of course, means Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, Computers. It means sustained immersion in an approach to, and attitude toward, the natural world that is based on reductionism and manipulation. With the formaldehyde-smelling ambiguity of Biology to the side, our entire approach to the natural world is overbearingly abstract and geared toward a practice of Science funneled into technology and the ever-deeper penetration of nature's inner structure—not for tender and reverent knowledge, but for cool and greedy power.

Mumford's *Pentagon of Power* shows how the drive for human domination of nature, at least in its modern form, derives heavily from two

trends easily traced to Europe from the late fifteenth century onward. Those trends are outward territorial expansion—world conquest and colonialism—and an increasingly congealed scientific-technological-industrial drive to reshape nature and the human community in civilization's own abstract, utopian image. Here's Mumford from page 4 of his *Pentagon*:

One mode of exploration was concerned with abstract symbols, rational systems, universal laws, repeatable and predictable events, objective mathematical measurements: it sought to understand, utilize, and control the forces that derive ultimately from the cosmos and the solar system. The other mode dwelt on the concrete and the organic, the adventurous, the tangible: to sail uncharted oceans, to conquer new lands, to subdue and overawe strange peoples, to discover new foods and medicines, perhaps to find the fountain of youth, or if not to seize by shameless force of arms the wealth of the Indies. In both modes of exploration, there was from the beginning a touch of defiant pride and demonic frenzy.¹

These touches of defiant pride and demonic frenzy now assert themselves as the only viable path of rationality—witness the current either/or of civilization versus terrorism—that casts all who would question or challenge, much less defy, civilization's absolute and inherent goodness as either foolish or evil. We drift along with conceptions of utopian good versus natural evil that direct our lives in innumerable ways. Even those of us alarmed by forecasts of global warming disasters still hop in our cars to go do trivial things. We watch and listen to reports of two million-plus inmates in American "correctional" institutions, including Wisconsin's very own Supermax. We read about the ever-increasing concentration of corporate power via merger and acquisition. We know that scores of billions of dollars are spent each year on military force to "protect" "our" oil supply from the Middle East. We have some kind of handle on cognition in regard to deindustrialization, the nearly total destruction of small-scale farming, drug consumption (and the "war on drugs"), the deepening divide between the haves and the have-nots, sweatshop labor and brand names, and the extermination of indigenous cultures worldwide.

Every slick and glossy ad on commercial television and in high-end national magazines tells us to celebrate power, indulge in perfection, consume without limit or consequence, believe that technological intelligence is in control. Every school system chugs along, doing its own little optimistic part—thanks to property tax and an ersatz "property tax

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relief”—to “meet the needs of the twenty-first century.” Just as the truant kid cannot possibly have a rational and justifiable reason for seeking to evade the compulsory utopia, so too “terrorists” cannot possibly have legitimate grievance against “civilization.” That a truant or troubled kid can become a “terrorist”—witness Columbine—only serves to activate our conventional fear, multiply security measures, intensify our need for snitches, and forge closer links with less and less civil liberties scrutiny between the compulsory utopia of the school and the compulsory dystopia of the jail. Witness John Ashcroft and Alberto Gonzales.

At what point do we read not only Mumford but also Paul Goodman (*Compulsory Miseducation*) and Ivan Illich (*Deschooling Society*)? No, we don't read them, we can't read them—or, if we do, the analysis we find there is so “outside the box,” so demanding of a social, economic, political, cultural, and educational reformation that it all seems absurd or hopeless. So we drift, incremental step by incremental step, toward global disaster. We *know* this is true. But. But is such a wonderful, all-purpose word. It's a post sunk to the center of the world around which we can change direction at whim or spin, spin, spin. Isn't it simply glorious that we have an administration that is in process of ridding the world of evil? Such fine frat boys, such unparalleled country club rug rats, such pious little squeaky-clean Sunday school snots—all of them tinkering with the controls to apocalypse. God's little cheerleaders with fifty-star pom-poms.

So—what about a Green school? To think about a Green school and a Green culture requires either hope—a conviction that somehow we will more or less safely emerge from this intensifying global hostility and carnage—or it requires escapist fantasy. There are people who, in principle, are pushing in a Green direction. There's a new private school called Conserve near Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin, and a public charter environmental school in Wisconsin's Kickapoo Valley. I don't frankly know enough about either to say much, except vaguely point in their direction. And yet, a Green school—probably either private or public charter—is possible, provided a group of capable, persuasive, and politically relentless people really wanted one in their community. The evidence and the contradiction in regard to science—our absolute and uncritical wallowing in abstract science and our indifference toward and contempt for non-invasive natural science—is palpable. A determined community group could embarrass a moderately enlightened school board into a creative act, provided *the money* could be found—given the superintendent's sal-

ary, the building debt, the retirement fund, and all that. The football team. The budget crunch.

A small school, built largely of local and native materials (logs, lumber, field stone), carefully sited to both fit the landscape and be close enough for at least a fair proportion of the kids to walk or bike to—this is a starting point. In the woods, near a river, creek, or lake. Garden space and compost bins. A kitchen and a workshop. What's to prevent a school being multiple-use? Simultaneously, a new town hall, local library, community meeting facility, theater, even office space for county, state, federal, or international agencies? An office of the United Nations?

Get the kids *out of the classroom*. Outside. Boots and raincoats. Snowshoes and mittens. Wading shoes and small backpacks for lunch, flora and fauna identification books, simple equipment (like a magnifying glass). Theater and crafts and languages and field trips to—Oh, my God!—Indian reservations and—double Oh, my God!—student exchange programs with Indian nations and inner-city kids from—triple Oh, my God!—Milwaukee. Does a kid want to stay at home today to help her dad bake bread? Encourage such behavior rather than punish it. Does somebody have an intense crush on Elizabeth Cady Stanton or John Muir and just can't quit reading? Let them alone except to pile on more books. (But ask for a class report, an essay, a lecture, a drawing.) Is there someone who wants to snowshoe to a remote spot on the river and just sit all day, in a prebuilt blind, with notebook to record what happens inside and out? Show that person the journals of Annie Dillard, Thomas Merton, and Henry David Thoreau. Toss in some haiku poetry. Encourage such concentrated inwardness.

Is it really absurd to believe that a sixteen year-old can weave a rug, build a shed, can vegetables, tend a garden, identify at a glance virtually every tree in the woods, recognize cloud types and weather patterns, feel comfortable in the forest, play one or more musical instruments, help out at a nursing home, speak at least one "foreign" language, clean a chimney (or build one), split firewood, sing folk songs without false posture or emotional paralysis, milk a cow, know elemental astronomy and geology, make cheese, and canoe the full length of the Wisconsin River in order to graduate? Well, throw out whatever of that doesn't appeal to you and make your own list—or would you rather have your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren just keep "going to school" so they can "graduate from college" so they can "get a good job" and "make lots of

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money” so they can have a “high standard of living”? Why not just buy them caskets and cemetery plots and not waste so much effort?

Are we alive? Are we citizens? Or are we conditioned two- and four-year suckup dependable voters, choosing the always-increasing lesser evil, never daring to exceed our precious little comfort zones? Our complicity in this lethal utopian system is heartbreaking as we mouth all the poisonously pious platitudes about “freedom,” “free trade,” “free enterprise,” “free will,” “God’s will.” Or “security.” There are still two ethical blocks to stand on, maybe only two. One is stewardship in Creation, and the other is servanthood among our own kind. If these ethical blocks have colors, the first is Green and the second is Red—stewardship and sharing. If we are to have a future worth living, these are the colors we will live by. Otherwise, as in C. S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce*, it’s the grey city and a long, long wait at the purgatorial, utopian bus stop for the bus that never arrives.

This bitter little essay is not what I set out to write. My intent was to describe, as fully as my blighted and meager imagination could achieve, the simple and complex beauty, the peacefulness, the neighborliness, the sense of sufficiency, the attentive sensitivity toward the natural world that surrounds us: how utterly *wholesome* it would be to live in a cooperative, self-provisioning gardening-and-farming community with cottage industry, elder hostels, homey recreation lodges, inns, rustic assisted-living facilities, a Buddhist/Quaker monastery—and a little school, down by the river, in which the keeping of routine, punctuality, and test records was low on the list of educational priorities—something at once very folksy and sophisticated, simultaneously local in an enveloping way and yet globally attentive in a caring, compassionate way.

I begin to imagine I understand the sorrow, dismay, and incredulity of Jesus when he told people the kingdom of heaven *is at hand*: let go of your pride, your greed, your neurotic security obsessions, your privatized salvation preoccupation, and engage the life that lies richly and cooperatively at hand. Like Christianity that has made a total otherworldly salvation cult out of Jesus’ “kingdom of heaven” (emptied almost completely of earthly content), so I fear that “Green” will be hyped, when it is inevitably grabbed by the political parade types, as economic technofix—“natural” capitalism. Gag me with a solar panel. And “Green” education will be how to achieve the Los Angelization of the planet with a recycled minimum of “externalities.”

GREEN POLITICS IS EUTOPIAN

Meanwhile, some of us *do* have a different vision with glimpses of simple, grounded earthiness from Martin Buber's "community all through," Wendell Berry's longing for authentic settledness in undefiled landscape—even some literary images from C. S. Lewis's Narnia and J. R. R. Tolkien's Hobbit Shire. And for those who snort and sneer and shake their heads at this alleged pseudo-innocence, this supposed inability to recognize the pervasiveness of *evil*, we reply, with sorrow: we are looking at evil, we were raised in evil, we were solicited and drafted by evil, we have been trained in the rationale and dissemination of evil, we are "protected" by evil. This evil's name is civilization. God save us from this utopian evil.

NOTES

1. Mumford, *Pentagon*, 4.