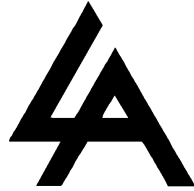


## COMPULSION VERSUS LIBERTY IN EDUCATION (4):

# THE MONTESSORI MOVEMENT AND ITS ENEMIES



**DAVID BOTSFORD**



Because young people throughout the industrialised world between the ages of roughly five or seven and roughly 16 or 18 are imprisoned in the compulsory school system, it has been difficult for educational innovators and scientists to develop new and more effective methods of transmitting knowledge and skills to individuals within this age group. Such innovations have therefore been confined to the teaching of adults and to young children who have not yet commenced their sentences for the crime of turning five, six or seven, depending on the penal code of each country. The most significant discoveries in the latter field have been those of the great educator and scientist Dr Maria Montessori. If the advocates of compulsory schooling can look upon John Calvin as the founder of the system they believe in, then supporters of the education of the free individual of the future may well look to Maria Montessori as the greatest single pioneer in the liberation of the human mind from bondage.

In 1896 Maria Montessori became the first woman in Italy to gain the degree of Doctor of Medicine. After graduating, she worked at the psychiatric clinic of the University of Rome, where she looked after mentally defective children, who in Italy at that time were incarcerated in mental hospitals, along with adults whose behaviour was considered to be "abnormal". She became interested in ways of educating these children to improve their mental performance, and in 1899 was appointed head of a new orthophrenic school to which all mentally defective children in Rome were sent. Her pedagogic methods, using specially-made equipment, succeeded in teaching many of these children to read and write so well that they were able to pass the examinations set for children of "normal" intelligence. In 1904 she was appointed professor of

anthropology at the University of Rome. She sought an opportunity to apply her new pedagogic methods to children of "normal" mental ability, but this was rendered almost impossible by the compulsory school attendance laws.

In 1906 she was given the chance to educate a group of "disorderly" children, aged four and five and of "normal" intelligence, in San Lorenzo, one of the poorest slum districts of Rome. Using similar educational equipment to that which she had used with defective children, she found that each of these normal children spontaneously chose and worked with these items of equipment, displayed intense mental concentration, repetition and a love of order and of work with the equipment. From her observations of these children, and her subsequent modification of the learning environment, she began to develop what is known as the Montessori method. What was particularly astonishing was how rapidly and enthusiastically the children, spontaneously and through their own efforts, acquired educational skills. For example, she gave the children cut-out letters of the alphabet, told them the sounds they represented, and showed them how to trace the forms of the letters with their fingers. They then started forming words with these letters. One day Montessori went onto the roof with the children and encouraged one boy to draw a picture of a chimney with a piece of chalk. Montessori describes the extraordinary "explosion into writing" which happened next:

The child looked at me, smiled, remained for a moment as if on the point of bursting into some joyous act, and then cried out: "I can write, I can write," and kneeling down again he wrote on the pavement the word "hand" (*mano*). Then full of enthusiasm, he wrote also "chimney, roof" (*camino, tetto*). As he wrote he continued to cry out "I can write; I know how to write." His cries of joy brought the other children, who formed a circle about him, looking down at his work in stupefied amazement. Two or three of them said to me, trembling with excitement, "Give me the chalk. I can write too." And indeed they began to write various words: MAMA, HAND, JOHN, CHIMNEY, ADA. Not one of them had ever taken chalk or any other instrument in hand for the purpose of writing. It was the *first time* they had ever written, and they traced an entire word, as a child when speaking for the first time speaks an entire word.

The first word written by my little ones aroused within themselves an indescribable emotion of joy. Not being able to adjust in their minds the connection between the preparation

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25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN  
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

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David Botsford is a freelance writer and desktop publisher, and a trainee hypnotherapist.

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Director: Dr Chris R. Tame  
Editorial Director: Brian Mickelthwait Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

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and the act, they were possessed by the illusion that, having now grown to proper size, they knew how to write. In fact they seemed to think that writing was but one of the many gifts of nature. ... In general, after the first word the children, with a species of frenzied joy, continued to write everywhere. I saw children crowding about one another at the blackboard; and behind those who were standing on the floor another line would for consisting of children mounted upon chairs so that they might write above the heads of their fellows.<sup>1</sup>

Thus began Montessori's extraordinary scientific discoveries about the nature of the child, and the development of the Montessori method, which creates an environment in which the child can develop to his or her full potential, a work which continued until her death in 1952. Such was the world-wide enthusiasm for her pioneering work in Rome that Montessori schools were established throughout the Western world and beyond, in Russia, China, Japan, India, Chile, Argentina and elsewhere. While a knowledge of Montessori's work is essential for anyone who wishes to understand the nature of the child, a fully adequate examination of it would easily fill a large volume, and we can do more here than to mention some of the concepts which it involves. It is important to recognise that — unlike the principles which govern the compulsory school — these facts are derived from scientific research, and not from the decrees of bureaucrats, recycled prejudices, or speculations consequent on any ideological premises.

### SENSITIVE PERIODS FOR LEARNING

Montessori found that the growing child is characterised by markedly different types of mind at each stage of his or her development. The ages 0-6 are the period of the Absorbent Mind. Within this first stage of childhood, the ages 0-3 are characterised by the unconscious mind, through which the child absorbs his or her environment and actually constructs the conscious mind using the inherent faculty of reason. During the ages 3-6, the child consciously takes in from the environment, using the faculties of will, thought and memory he or she has constructed in the first three years. Throughout the ages 0-6, in the work of constructing the human personality, the child requires an environment in which he or she can act and learn freely, without adult intervention. During the child's development, there are certain "sensitive periods" for learning during which the child is capable of extraordinary leaps in learning of different skills and bodies of knowledge, of which the "explosion into writing" described above is one example. It is essential that the child should be able to maximise his or her potential during these sensitive periods, in order to develop as a full human being. As Montessori explains, "if the child misses some of his sensitive periods during his development, he will still grow up into an adult. But that adult will not be so strong nor so perfect an individual as he would have been if he had been able to avail himself of their constructive power."<sup>2</sup> In short, the work of the child is to create the fully-formed adult that is to be. This work is utterly different from the activities that characterise adult life.

In order to enable the child to develop, the Montessori method creates a prepared environment containing a wide range of specially-designed educational equipment with which the child works to develop his or her faculties. Typically about 30 children are in the same room. The directress (Montessori avoided the word "teacher" with its authoritarian implications) introduces each child into the use of each item of equipment; then each child freely chooses the equipment with which he or she wishes to work. It is essential that every child is free to move around at will and to perform the activities he or she chooses, without adult interference. The directress simply helps each child in pursuing his or her chosen activities, and does not tell him or her what to do. Her task is to establish a "point of contact" between the child and the materials, after which she must not intervene in the child's spontaneous work with the equipment. All activities are performed by the individual child, who is free to assist and teach other children, and not by the group as a whole. In these activities, mind and body are part of the same unity, and are actively constructed by the child's

purposeful and self-directed movements. There is no artificial separation of mental and physical education. As Montessori explained:

*The educational value of a movement depends on the finality (or end) of the movement; and it must be such that it helps the child to perfect something in himself; either it perfects the voluntary muscular system ('the flesh'); or some mental capacity; or both. Educational movement must always be an activity which builds up and fortifies the personality, giving him a new power and not leaving him where he was.<sup>3</sup>*

Montessori demonstrated that the child's mind is composed of two parts: the centre, the driving force from which all actions and thoughts proceed, and the periphery, the part of the mind which comes into direct contact with the outside world. The Montessori prepared environment provided materials which feed the periphery; the centre builds the individual mental system from information it gains thereby. The central purpose of the Montessori system is the liberty and independence of the individual child, who constructs his or her own personality through self-chosen purposeful activities in the prepared environment. Montessori's British colleague and biographer, E. M. Standing, explains:

Just as no two human faces are alike, so each mind is a special creation and builds up a unique system of knowledge. Each has its own special capacities, its own affinities, its own emphasis, its own method of organizing its experience, its own flashes of illumination. Yet how often do these individual characteristics become blurred — not to say cancelled — by education, instead of being made ever more distinct? ... The Montessori liberty is, par excellence, guardian of this individuality. Because of it the child's personality is always acting as a whole. All his faculties — intellect, sensations, memory, feeling, muscles and will, body and soul — are working together in the functional unity of one complete organism.

Such liberty works in a sort of beneficent circle to preserve and accentuate the child's individuality. First, because through his free choice the child expresses and strengthens his individuality. And secondly, because the directress — by observing these individual differences thus freely manifested — is able to take them into account and therefore better able to respond to each child's needs accordingly, thus respecting and strengthening the individual traits of character.<sup>4</sup>

### THE FORGOTTEN CITIZEN

So excellent were the educational results achieved by children educated by the Montessori method that they were dubbed "the new children" by admirers of the system. The implications were enormous. According to Montessori, "It is only when we realize the wonderful way in which the child creates the man that we realize, at the same time, that we hold in our hands a secret by which we can help in the formation of a better humanity."<sup>5</sup> She identified the denial of the individual freedom of children, caused by a misunderstanding of their nature, as the greatest evil prevailing in contemporary society, and described her work as "an effort to bring about a great social revolution on behalf of the 'forgotten citizen' (*il cittadino dimenticato*) whose rights have hitherto never been properly recognised by society."<sup>6</sup>

By replacing the present subjugation of the child with freedom, Montessori argued, we would at the same time uproot all the other injustices which result from it:

Since this struggle between the child and the adult is almost universal, a psychically healthy adult is a rarity. The unsatisfied needs of the child leave their mark in the adult, in whom they come out as inhibitions preventing intellectual development, or deviations of moral character, or in countless other psychic anomalies.<sup>7</sup>

Standing explains further:

Montessori would have us realize that, just as every adult citizen, qua citizen, enjoys certain rights and privileges (such

as the right to vote, to a living wage, to a fair trial, and so on) so also the child has certain inalienable rights, also as a citizen. Unfortunately these have never been recognized by adults in the past; not through any deliberate wish to deprive him of them, but simply through ignorance. ... In fact society has gone a long way towards recognizing the rights of the child as a physical human being. What is still lacking, however, is a corresponding general recognition of the child's rights as a developing human personality - the right to develop a free interior life according to the laws of his mental and spiritual nature. ... Anyone who wishes to respect the developing interior life of the child must therefore respect certain elementary rights. Amongst these we may single out the right to independence, the right to activity, and the right to explore the world for himself. To which we may add the right to claim suitable working conditions: i.e., a prepared environment without which his great task of creating the man cannot be satisfactorily accomplished. ... We still read in the press, with alarming frequency, of cases where children have actually been tied up to keep them still, or doped to keep them quiet. ... A life tormented by so many inhibitions would be bad enough even for adults; but how much worse are their effects on children, for whom it is not simply a question of feeling irritated or annoyed — as it would be with the adult — but almost a question of life or death — of their very existence as a human being. Independence, activity, free exploration of the world about him through the sense and movement, these form the very essence of his mental life. ... The first step towards the liberation of these 'enslaved masses' is the adoption of a new attitude of mind by the adult towards the child. An attitude more humble, more reverent, more full of faith in the inner God-given creative energies within him. We must do away with what Froebel [19th-century founder of the Kindergarten] used to call the 'categorical, interfering way of dealing with the child.' Above all we must seek to find the limits of our help; and cease thinking, as we tend to do in our pride, that his progress depends entirely on us — and not just as much on those powers within him.<sup>8</sup>

Montessori also developed ideas for the education of children in what she called "the Second Epoch of Development" (ages 6-12) and for adolescents (ages 12-18), again based on scientific observation of sensitive periods within these age groups. It is in adolescence, she demonstrated, that the young person develops into a socially conscious individual, and that the nature of his or her future relationships with other individuals is formed. The repressive regime of the compulsory secondary school distorted the development of young people within it. She explained,

It is just because this is the time when the social man is being created — but has not yet reached his full development — that many defects in adjustment to social life take their origin. For example, a feeling of inferiority at this period may give rise to an 'inferiority complex'; and there may arise a repugnance to social life which may endure for years. Such defects in social adjustment may have dangerous consequences for the individual, resulting in timidity, anxiety, depression, as well as the inferiority complex just mentioned. Bad results may follow for society, too, in the form of incapacity for work, laziness, dependence on others, a cynical outlook, and even 'criminality'. Here — in the problem of social adjustment — lies the really vital problem of education for the adolescents, far more so than in the passing of examinations.<sup>9</sup>

Instead of compulsory schooling for adolescents, which seeks to shape the individual into a servile being, Montessori proposed involvement in voluntary "land settlements" in the countryside, where young people would have the opportunity to learn a wide range of practical skills in a new "prepared environment", with the purpose of bringing them to economic independence. According to Montessori,

the whole life of the adolescent should be organized in such a way that it will enable him, when the time comes, to make a triumphal entry into social life — not entering it debilitated, isolated, or humiliated, but with head high, sure of himself. Success in life depends on a self-confidence born of a true knowledge of one's own capacities; combined with many-sided powers of adaption — in fact on what we have called 'valorization of personality'.<sup>10</sup>

However, because of almost universal compulsory school attendance, Montessori's ideas for the education of young people from the age of six onwards have never yet been put into practice.

### FASCISM IN ITALY, GERMANY AND BRITAIN

Had Montessori's discoveries, techniques and ideas been developed in an historical epoch where reason and liberty were the paramount values, they could well have led to a qualitative improvement in human life throughout the world. The Western world in the 20th century, however, was not such an epoch. At the end of the 19th century, when Montessori began her great work, the Italian state, although it imposed compulsory schooling on children from the age of six onwards, did not seek to control them before that age. The Montessori system was therefore able to develop freely until the establishment of the fascist dictatorship from 1922. Mussolini declared, "We are advocates of the collective significance of life, and we wish to develop this at the cost of individualism."<sup>11</sup> Nowhere did this principle manifest itself more thoroughly than in the control of children. The state forced all children from the age of four to join fascist youth organisations, where they wore black shirts and drilled using toy machine guns. After the advent of National Socialism in Germany, too, the state compelled all children to join its political organisations, and the very word "child" became a derogatory term. An official National Socialist definition ran as follows: "The term 'child' describes the non-uniformed creature who has never participated in a group meeting or a route march."<sup>12</sup> Both these regimes recognised Maria Montessori as the irreconcilable enemy of everything they stood for. As Standing explains:

When the Fascist rule became dominant in Italy, she came to realize that an education which had as its aim the development of a strong and free personality could not thrive in a totalitarian atmosphere. Indeed, the Fascists ordered all her schools to be closed down. In Germany and Austria — then under Nazi rule — things were even more drastic. An effigy of Montessori was burned over a pyre of her own books in a public square both in Berlin and Vienna. So she went to Spain, where she made Barcelona her headquarters. In course of time the Spanish Civil War broke out. As a Roman Catholic, and one who had written books on the teaching of religion, her life and property were in danger. With the assistance of the British Government she managed to get away (at an hour's notice) on a British battleship.<sup>13</sup>

It would be mistaken to assume that attempts by governments in the Western world to destroy the Montessori system have been confined to such classic "totalitarian" forces as the Italian fascists, German National Socialists and Spanish communists. The current Tory government in Britain, too, has introduced legislation which is now wrecking the Montessori system in this country. The Children Act 1989 gives the social services departments of local authorities control over private day-care centres for children of "pre-school" age, and the government has arbitrarily — and inaccurately — defined Montessori schools as care centres, rather than the educational establishments they are. The Act specifies detailed plans as to how these centres are to be run — and these blueprints contradict the most fundamental principles of the Montessori method.

One of these principles is that children aged from two to five should be able to learn together without age barriers. The Children Act, by contrast, forces the Montessori schools to impose age apartheid on children, and artificially to segregate them by age group. Another Montessori principle is that too many adults in the

learning environment disrupts the work of the children, and typical staff ratios in these schools are 8:1. The Act stipulates that there must be one teacher for every four pupils under the age of three, and that children of this age should be divided into groups of no more than eight. The Act also lays down that only teachers with the certificate of the Pre-school Playgroups Association — an organisation closely linked to social services departments — may teach children of “pre-school” age; Montessori qualifications are not recognised as valid, and the state will close down schools which employ staff with Montessori certificates only, no matter how many years of experience they have. And the Montessori schools are the only educational establishments, as opposed to purely day-care centres, to come under the auspices of the Children Act: three-year-old children in the nursery classes of non-Montessori private schools can still lawfully be taught by one teacher in a class of 20 without state intervention or regulation.

Susannah Hall established the Cobham Montessori School, in Surrey, in 1962, and has run it ever since. In September 1991 the local council’s “day-care adviser” sent her a letter calling a meeting to discuss “the challenge of change” the Children Act would bring. By December she was having to defend the qualifications of one of her best members of staff to the local anomalies committee and later the quality assurance department. According to Mrs Hall,

My nursery school is not a day-care facility. Nor is it a playgroup. It is an educational establishment and I do not see why it should come under the auspices of social services who show more interest in the number of lavatories than in children’s education.<sup>14</sup>

Early in 1992, Mrs Hall wrote the first of several letters to Virginia Bottomley, the Health Secretary, describing the “Kafkaesque embrace” of social services, who threatened to close the school if she did not make the changes they demanded, and complaining that “The new Act places me completely at their mercy. My choice of staff, the running of my school, all will come under their scrutiny.”<sup>15</sup> Now we all know about Virginia Bottomley. We know about the reign of terror she has unleashed against everybody from ordinary families to owners of private nurseries to drinkers and smokers. We know that this politician — assisted by her Cabinet colleagues — is in the process of constructing a regime of “health fascism” in which the state controls the details of the daily life of the individual to an extent unprecedented in the history of this country. Readers will hardly be surprised, therefore that in replying to Mrs Hall, the Department of Health took the side of the local authority and wrote:

The local authority is responsible for regulating day care services locally. They must decide ... what standards should be required of those providing day care or education services. The social services department has a duty to impose requirements on a day care provider relating to numbers of children, staff, safety and records. They also have discretion to impose other requirements and these could include the qualifications held by the officer in charge and perhaps staff.<sup>16</sup>

Facing these threats from national and local government, Mrs Hall explains the dilemma she faces as follows:

If I succumb, I will have to employ two or three more teachers. This would make the school uneconomic. I would be forced to divide the children into smaller groups, which is utterly opposed to Montessori training. It would completely alter the character and routine of the school. Too many adults in the classroom can be disruptive rather than helpful. I cannot run the school this way. At the very least I would have to exclude under-threes and dismiss loyal staff or increase fees dramatically.<sup>17</sup>

Mrs Hall is now lobbying for a modification of the Children Act before her deadline to comply runs out, in an effort to avoid closure. As she explains:

For the children’s sake, I must continue to follow Dr Maria Montessori’s inspired training and uphold her standards. No one has asked why we are being bullied in this way. How can

a system that has built up a reputation for excellence suddenly be deemed unsatisfactory? The Government claims to be appalled by poor reading and writing standards. What is the logic in penalising the places that provide this vital tuition without Government help or finance?<sup>18</sup>

Some answers to the questions posed by Mrs Hall can be obtained if we follow the teaching of Ayn Rand (who was incidentally a strong supporter of the Montessori movement) and examine the philosophical premises which underlie the actions of individuals and governments. Such an examination will demonstrate that the government’s assault on the Montessori schools is perhaps rather more logical than it appears. Why indeed have the fascists in Italy, the National Socialists in Germany and the Tories in Britain singled out for destruction such a remarkably successful system for educating young children? The modern totalitarian state, which is just as likely call itself a “democracy” as an open dictatorship, depends not merely on violence and terror to maintain its rule — though it is quick to use them where they prove useful. It prefers to control individuals and institutions by providing them with favours and privileges in return for control over their lives, with violence only used as a secondary resort and against selected targets, *pour encourager les autres*. However, it cannot integrate into its system the free and independent individual whose powers have been developed to the maximum and who has not been instilled with that conditioned reflex of wishing to coerce others, and of submitting to coercion by others, on which the totalitarian state depends. At all costs the development of such individuals must be prevented. The thug wielding a bludgeon is the only possible weapon that such a state can use against an educational system which produces such individuals. Supporters of individual liberty describe Mrs Bottomley as a “health fascist”. Observing the treatment she and her stormtroopers in social services departments are meting out to the Montessori system in this country, readers will doubtless agree that the word “health” in this label is somewhat superfluous.

In 1947 the Italian government invited Maria Montessori back to reconstruct the Montessori movement in her own country, as a demonstration of its repudiation of fascism and its values and practices. Today Montessori’s portrait adorns an Italian banknote of high denomination. The fact that the Tory government is deliberately suppressing the Montessori schools here is an ominous indication of its intentions with regard to the future of this country. At whatever one may say about the Italian fascists and German National Socialists, they never got voted to power in four successive general elections on promises to reduce the power of the state and increase individual liberty. It was fortunate for Montessori that the British battleship which rescued her from Barcelona in 1936 had not been sent by the British government of today. If it had, she would doubtless have been thrown to the nearest berserk mob of totalitarians to be torn limb from limb like a modern Hypatia.

## NOTES

1. Quoted in E. M. Standing, *Maria Montessori*, (first published 1957), Mento-Omega/New American Library, New York, 1962, pp. 48-9.
2. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 136
3. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 233, italics in original.
4. *Ibid*, p. 293.
5. Quoted in *ibid*, pp. 157-8.
6. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 252.
7. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 262.
8. *Ibid*, pp. 253-4, 262.
9. Quoted in *ibid*, page 117.
10. Quoted in *ibid*, pages 117-118.
11. Quoted in Christopher Hibbert, *Benito Mussolini*, first published 1962, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, (1975 edition), page 81.
12. Quoted in Richard Grunberger, *A Social History of the Third Reich*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, (first published 1971), 1974 edition, page 353.
13. Standing, *op cit*, page 85.
14. Quoted in *Daily Telegraph*, 15th July 1992, page 15.
15. *Ibid*.
16. *Ibid*.
17. *Ibid*.
18. *Ibid*.