

## COMPULSION VERSUS LIBERTY IN EDUCATION (9):

# THE SCHOOL OF BARBIANA

DAVID BOTSFORD



I have examined elsewhere<sup>1</sup> the deschooling movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which advocated the abolition of school, the handing of financial resources allocated to the school back to the individual to spend on the education he or she wanted, the right of every individual both to learn from any other individual and to teach any other individual who wished to learn what he or she had to offer, and also of breaking the grip which the concept of school held over the wider society.

Let us now examine another challenge to the Second Wave school system which has occurred since the onset of the Third Wave: the School of Barbiana, one of the alternatives to the traditional hierarchical state school of the 1950s and 60s. One hopes that this example will demonstrate to Mr Patten and other enthusiasts for coercion and central planning that, to quote the Education Secretary's favourite writer,

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

### THERE BECAUSE THEY WANTED TO BE THERE

The School of Barbiana was founded in the 1950s by a priest, Don Lorenzo Milani, in Barbiana, a poor and remote village in the mountains of Tuscany. Most of the young people of Barbiana had either failed their examinations in the state schools and left, or become bitterly discouraged with the way they were taught there. Don Milani set up a small school for these youngsters as an alternative to the official schools. Attendance was completely voluntary; only those individuals came who were unhappy with, or had been classified as "failures" by, the centrally-planned schools. It was not strictly speaking a case of "parental choice", although the school rapidly gained the enthusiastic support of parents: the young people were there because they wanted to be there, and not because their parents had

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forced them. The school had no professionally trained teachers: a large proportion of the teaching was carried out by older pupils to younger ones. The focus of the school was on the study and understanding of problems directly significant to the lives of the pupils: the young people themselves decided what they were to learn and how, and obtained the resources and equipment they considered most appropriate to achieving these goals, ignoring the methods of the state schools. Don Milani ran the school until his death in 1967, after which the young people continued to run it themselves. Eight pupils from the school wrote a book entitled *Letter to a Teacher*, first published in 1969, in which they explained the work of the school, and gave a devastating and bitter critique of the Italian compulsory school system. The book became a best-seller in Italy, and was translated into many languages. Its value is greatly increased by the fact that it is the work of young people themselves, and not that of academics, teachers, parents or ideologues trying to identify the experiment with their own viewpoint.

As its title implies, the book takes the form of a letter written to a state school teacher, and the authors choose to write in the first person singular, describing their own experiences in both the state schools and the School of Barbiana. Libertarians and deschoolers alike will take issue with several arguments the book makes, but its penetrating indictment of the established school system is even more valuable today than when it was first written, and just as relevant for every Western country as it is for Italy.

The authors attacked the state school curriculum as being useless for the real purpose for which the knowledge should be acquired, and deliberately making it far more complicated than necessary. The teaching of French, for example, was irrelevant to the ability to actually communicate in that language:

The French exam was a concentrate of irregularities.

Examinations should be abolished. But if you do give them, at least be fair. Difficulties should be chosen in proportion to their appearance in life. If you choose them too frequently it means you have a trap-complex. As if you were at war with the boys.

What makes you do it? Is it for the good of the students?...

No, not for their own good. You gave an A- in French to a boy who, in France, would not know how to ask the whereabouts of the toilet.

He could only have asked for owls, pebbles and fans, either in the singular or the plural. All in all, he knew perhaps two hundred words picked carefully for being exceptions, not for being commonly used.

The result was that he hated French the way some people hate maths. ...

Instead, I learned my languages from records. Without effort I learned first the most useful and common words. Just the way one's own language is learned.

In the summer I had been in Grenoble washing dishes in a restaurant — I had felt at home right away. ...

At the oral examination we had a surprise. Your students seemed to be bottomless wells of French culture. For example, they spoke with great knowledge of the castles of the Loire.

We found out later on that this was the only thing they had studied all year. They had also prepared some selections from a syllabus and could read and translate them.

If an inspector happened to pass by, they could put up a better show than we could. The inspector does not venture outside the syllabus. Although you know perfectly well, and so does he, that that kind of French is useless. And for whom are you doing it? You do it for the inspector. He does it for the school superintendent. And he does it for the Minister of Education.

That is the most upsetting aspect of your school: it lives as an end in itself.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in mathematics:

The geometry problem in the exam brought to mind a sculpture in one of the modern-art exhibitions: 'A solid is formed by a hemisphere superimposed on a cylinder whose surface is three-sevenths of that. ...'

There is no instrument that can measure surfaces. Thus, it never happens in life that we know the surface without knowing the dimensions. Such a problem can only be conceived by a sick mind.<sup>4</sup>

And in Latin:

You even have us translate from Italian into Latin. But who can draw the exact line where Latin ends and Italian begins?

Somebody or other even wrote a Latin grammar for you. It is a major swindle. Because for every rule, one should know when and where it really originates.

Conformists accept the imposition of grammar and learn all the rules by heart. The one thing they care about is promotion. In turn, they will play the same rule-book game when they themselves are teachers.

You underlined the word 'portavit' in one paper of mine. According to you it is a crime to try to simplify anything when it can be made complicated. The curious fact is that Cicero often used 'porto'. 'He was a Roman and didn't even know it.'<sup>5</sup>

### THE POOR PAY FOR THE SCHOOLING OF THE RICH

Meanwhile, the young people's practical knowledge and culture of rural life was excluded from or falsified by the school:

Our culture is a gift that we bring to you. A vital breath of air to relieve the dryness of your books written by men who have done nothing but read books. ...

Glancing through the pages of school textbooks we see plants, animals, the seasons. It seems that only a peasant could have written it.

But no, the authors are products of your school. It's enough just to glance at the pictures: left-handed farmers, round shovels, hooked hoes, blacksmiths with tools used in Roman times, cherry trees with the leaves of plum trees. "My first-year teacher told me one day, 'Climb that tree and pick some cherries for me.' When my mother heard this, she said, 'Whoever gave her a teaching licence?'"

You gave her a teaching licence but you deny me one, when I know all my trees, each by each.

I also know my *sormenti* [twigs and vine-shoots]. I have pruned them, gathered them, used them to bake bread. In one of my papers you underlined 'sormenti' as a mistake. You insisted that the word is 'sarmenti' because it comes from Latin. Then you sneaked away to look up its meaning in the dictionary.<sup>6</sup>

The authors described how middle-class pupils were able to play the complex game of simultaneously passing examinations in this absurd curriculum and also ingratiating themselves with the teachers, feigning interest in what they were learning. Thus they obtained the teachers' favour and went on to advanced levels of school and university, while the poor, who did not respond in the way the school required, became discouraged, were classified as failures, and were forced to leave the school system, which restricted higher education — then the passport to well-paid careers — to the minority who had successfully completed the school ritual:

The poorest among the parents don't do a thing. They don't even suspect what is going on. Instead, they feel quite moved. In their time, they left school at nine.

If things are not going well, it must be that their child is not cut out for studying. "Even the teacher said so. A real gentleman. He asked me to sit down. He showed me the record book. And a test all covered with red marks. I suppose we just weren't blessed with an intelligent boy. He will go to work in the fields, like us."<sup>7</sup>

Thus were the children of the poor rejected as "failures" by the system. And worse:

The curious thing is that the salaries that go towards throwing us out are paid by us, the rejected.

That man is poor who consumes all of his earnings. Rich is the man who consumes only a fraction. In Italy, for no clear reason, consumer goods are taxed to the last penny. But the income tax is a real joke.

I have been told that the economics textbooks call this system 'painless'. Painless means that the rich manage to have the poor pay the taxes without the poor noticing it.<sup>8</sup>

(Compare this passage to the one quoted above by West concerning false assumptions in Britain about the financing of education through taxation.)<sup>9</sup>

These arguments were backed up by detailed statistical analysis and tables, which appear on pages 34-54 and 115-134 of the English translation of the book. These statistics showed, for the first time, the wastage of young people classified as "failures" by the state school system, the fact that these "failures" came overwhelmingly from the ranks of the poor, and how poorer people paid grossly disproportionately, through taxation, for the lengthy schooling of the rich. The School of Barbiana was awarded the prize of the Italian Physical Society, normally reserved for a distinguished physicist or mathematician, for this statistical work. Remember that these young people had been officially classified as "failures" and "unfit for study" by the state school.

The authors argued that the state school timetable meant that the poor received insufficient tuition time for a worthwhile education:

School, with today's timetable, is a war against the poor. If the government won't impose longer hours of teaching, it should have nothing to do with schools.

### "SCHOOL IS A WAR AGAINST THE POOR"

This is a very serious conclusion. Up to now the State schools have been considered an improvement over the private. We might have to reconsider everything and put the school back in the hands of someone else. Someone with an idealistic urge to teach, and to teach us.<sup>10</sup>

Compare this proposal with those advocated by some of the so-called "free marketeers" in Britain whose writings about education are published by bodies such as the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Adam Smith Institute. "School...is a war against the poor," and if it does not improve, then "the government ... should have nothing to do with schools." Radical words. I wonder how many of the "free market" advocates of the National Curriculum, of changing the personnel running the bureaucracy, of the "opting-out" of schools into Department of Education central planning, of "parental choice" between two state schools teaching exactly the same things in the exactly the same way, and of altering the way the state trains its teachers would give them an unqualified endorsement.

Needless to say, the proposal — by a bunch of rural kids and make it work for the benefit of its consumers, in the mountains of Tuscany — to privatise the education system, did not endear the School of Barbiana to the Italian political parties, least of all the socialist ones. As the authors correctly predicted:

Newspapers of the left and the centre have always applauded any publication on the school of Barbiana. After this book, they may join with the right and start hating us. Then it will be clear that there is a party bigger than all other parties: the Party of Italian College Graduates, '*Partito Italiano Laureati*'.<sup>10</sup>

And not just in Italy, either.

### NOTES

1. David Botsford, *Ivan Illich and the Deschooling Movement*, Educational Notes No. 13, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1993.
2. William Shakespeare, Hamlet, in *Collected Works*, Murrays, London, 1973 edition, p. 854.
3. School of Barbiana, *Letter to a Teacher* (1969), translated by Nora Rossi and Tom Cole, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1972 edition, p. 27.
4. *Ibid*, p. 28.
5. *Ibid*, p. 97. The quotation is from a poem by Pascarella, a poet who wrote in Roman dialect.
6. *Ibid*, pp. 95-96.
7. *Ibid*, p. 34.
8. *Ibid*, p. 60.
9. Quoted in David Botsford, *Compulsion Versus Liberty in Education (2): The British Road From Freedom to Despotism*, Educational Notes No. 16, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1993, p. 4.
10. *Ibid*, p. 75.