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# The Voluntaryist

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## Voluntaryist Critics of State Education

By George H. Smith

[Editor's Note: The author of this article is probably best known to readers of this newsletter as the person responsible for suggesting its title, THE VOLUNTARYIST. The following essay first appeared as the “Introduction” to an anthology edited by George H. Smith and Marilyn Moore, titled CRITICS OF STATE EDUCATION (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2017). The complete book is available as a free ebook at [www.libertarianism.org/books](http://www.libertarianism.org/books). Permission to reprint given by Grant Babcock, Cato.Org; email of October 25, 2017, 3:30 pm. Sections III thru Section VI appear here, and Section VII will be published subsequently. Freedom and free-market competition in all spheres of life has been and is an on-going theme in these pages. Footnotes and other articles advocating freedom in education can be found at [www.voluntaryist.com/homeschooling](http://www.voluntaryist.com/homeschooling).]

### III

The relationship between school and state in American liberal thought has a checkered past. Many traditional heroes of American individualism, such as Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, upheld some role for government in education, however minor that role is by today's standard. Even William Leggett, the radical Jacksonian and *laissez-faire* advocate who opposed nearly all kinds of government intervention, made an exception in the case of education.<sup>31</sup>

Radical individualism in America was a different matter. Josiah Warren, often regarded as the first American anarchist, warned in 1833 that national aid to education would be like “paying the fox to take care of the chickens,” and said he feared the consequences of placing control of education in the hands of single group.<sup>32</sup> Gerrit Smith, a radical abolitionist who supported John Brown, upheld the separation of school and state. “It is justice and not charity which the people need at the hands of government,” Smith argued. “Let government restore to them their land, and what other rights they have been robbed of, and they will be able to pay for themselves - to pay their schoolmasters, as well as their parsons.”<sup>33</sup> William Youmans (an admirer of Herbert Spencer and a founder and editor of *Popular Science Monthly*) favored leaving education to “private enterprise.”<sup>34</sup> And the Spencerian John Bonham vigorously attacked “the one true system” of Horace Mann that would impose a dulling uniformity

and would extirpate diversity in education.<sup>35</sup>

The most thorough arguments against state education appeared in the writings of British (classical) liberals during the 1840s and 1850s. Calling themselves “Voluntaryists” - a label originally embraced by those who called for the complete disestablishment of the Church of England - these liberals launched a sustained campaign against state education in England that, though it was doomed to failure, produced a remarkable body of literature that has been largely ignored by historians.

The British Voluntaryist movement grew from the ranks of Dissenters, or Nonconformists (i.e., non-Anglican Protestants). After the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, Dissenters who refused to subscribe to the articles of the Established Church of England faced severe legal disabilities. Oxford and Cambridge were effectively closed to them, as were other conventional channels of education. Dissenters therefore established their own educational institutions, such as the dissenting academies of the 18th century, which one historian has described as “the greatest schools of their day.”<sup>36</sup>

Until 1833, elementary education in England progressed without substantial state aid or interference. Free education on an ambitious scale had been undertaken by Dissenters, or Nonconformists, with the establishment, in 1808, of the British and Foreign School Society (originally called the Royal Lancasterian Society). Funded primarily by Dissenting congregations, the society used the monitorial system, which employed abler students to help teach their classmates, to bring education to the working classes without government assistance.<sup>37</sup> These efforts motivated Anglicans to form the National Society, which established competing free schools for educating the poor.

Over the next decade, government funds were made available to both Dissenters and Anglicans. Each pound from voluntary contributions was matched by the government, up to £20,000 per annum. Because the Anglican schools were receiving more contributions than the Dissenting schools, the former received most of the government funds, so Dissenters began to learn the hard way that government aid to education would serve the prevailing orthodoxy.

Even by 1839, when the Melbourne administration proposed to increase aid to £30,000 pounds per annum, relatively few Dissenters expressed opposition. Most Dissenters approved of, or silently accept-

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ed, state funding if it did not favor one religious group over another and if it did not entail state interference. The one Dissenting deputy who argued that education “is not a legitimate function of the government” could find no support among his peers,<sup>38</sup> and a meeting of Dissenting ministers in 1840 expressed its “satisfaction” with government aid for education.

All this changed in 1843 after Sir James Graham, home secretary under the Peel administration, presented a bill to the House of Commons titled *A Bill for Regulating the Employment of Children and Young Persons in Factories, and for the Better Education of Children in Factory Districts*. Among other things, the bill required factory children to attend school for at least three hours each day, five days per week, and it placed effective control of those schools (to be financed largely from local rates) in the hands of the Established Church of England.<sup>39</sup> “The Church has ample security,” wrote Graham, “that every master in the new schools will be a Churchman, and that the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, as far as the limited exposition may be carried, will necessarily be in conformity with his creed.”<sup>40</sup>

Dissenting opposition to Graham’s bill was swift and severe. It “set the whole country on fire,” according to one observer.<sup>41</sup> *Eclectic Review*, a leading Dissenting journal, declared:

From one end of the empire to the other, the sound of alarm has gone forth, and the hundreds of thousands who have answered to its call have astonished and confounded our opponents. The movement has been at once simultaneous and determined. The old spirit of the puritans has returned to their children, and men in high places are in consequence standing aghast, astonished at what they witness, reluctant to forego their nefarious purpose, yet scarce daring to persist in the scheme.<sup>42</sup>

Thousands of petitions with over 2 million signatures were presented to the House in opposition to the Factories Education Bill, whereupon Graham submitted amendments in an effort to appease the Dissenters. But to no avail. Petitions against the amended clauses contained nearly another 2 million

signatures, and the measure was withdrawn.

It was during this agitation that support by Dissenters for state aid to education (provided it did not involve interference) transformed into opposition to all such aid. Edward Baines, Jr. - editor of the *Leeds Mercury*, the most influential provincial newspaper in England - described the transition:

The dangerous bill of Sir James Graham, and the evidence brought out of the ability and disposition of the people to supply the means of education, combined to convince the editors of the *Mercury* that it is far safer and better for Government not to interfere at all in the work; and from that time forward they distinctly advocated that view.<sup>43</sup>

The Voluntaryist philosophy crystallized quickly. In meetings of the Congregational Union held in Leeds (October 1843), Baines articulated the basic arguments against state education that he would develop in more detail over the next 20 years.<sup>44</sup> The Congregational Union officially declared itself in favor of voluntary education.<sup>45</sup> An education conference held at the Congregational Union in Leeds (December 1843) resolved that “all funds confided to the disposal of the central committee, in aid of schools, be granted only to schools sustained entirely by voluntary contributions.”<sup>46</sup>

By 1846 the majority of Congregationalists and Baptists supported voluntary education.<sup>47</sup> Leading newspapers and journals of the Dissenters - such as the *Leeds Mercury*, the *Nonconformist*, and the *Eclectic Review* - argued the case for Voluntaryism. Many Voluntaryists were active in the Anti-Corn Law League (which led a successful campaign to abolish import tariffs on grain), and they applied the principles of free trade to education. Voluntaryists energetically disputed reports that purported to show the deplorable condition of voluntary schools,<sup>48</sup> and they accused government committees of misrepresenting facts and distorting evidence to buttress their case for government interference.<sup>49</sup>

Not all Dissenters supported Voluntaryism, of course; some Nonconformist journals, such as the *British Quarterly Review*, attacked Voluntaryism vigorously. In addition, some Manchester free-trade advocates (most notably Richard Cobden) were active in the movement for state secular education, creating a serious rift among British liberals. Indeed, in 1848 Cobden remarked that “education is the main cause of the split among the middle-class Liberals.”<sup>50</sup>

In Leeds the question was whether the State should intervene at all, while in Manchester it concerned the form that intervention should take. ... Leeds imposed a prescriptive ban upon state education per se; Manchester sought to define the proper goals of a state education scheme that was both necessary and desirable.<sup>51</sup>

One important Voluntaryist was Herbert Spencer

(1820–1903), the leading libertarian philosopher of his day. Although Spencer became an agnostic, he was home-schooled in Dissenting causes by his father and uncle. “Our family was essentially a *dissenting* family,” Spencer wrote in later life, “and dissent is an expression of antagonism to arbitrary control.” Much of Spencer’s first political article, written in his early 20s and published in the *Nonconformist* in 1842, was devoted to a critique of state education, and it possibly influenced the birth of the Voluntarist movement in the following year.<sup>52</sup>

“The man who sanctions [gun-run government] education has no basis for opposing compulsory health insurance.”

- R. C. Hoiles to Leonard Read, August 17, 1946 in Brian Doherty, *RADICALS FOR CAPITALISM* (2007), p. 177.

Other prominent Dissenters who campaigned for Voluntarism were Joseph Sturge (1793–1859), a Quaker pacifist who played an important role in the antislavery movement; Samuel Morley (1809–1886); Andrew Reed (1787–1862); Henry Richard (1812–1888); Edward Miall (1809–1881); and the previously mentioned Edward Baines, Jr. (1800–1890). Of these men, Miall and Baines were the most important. Edward Miall founded and edited the *Nonconformist*, one of the most important Dissenting periodicals of its day. Miall was a tireless campaigner for both the separation of church and state and the separation of school and state. Edward Baines, Jr. - for many years editor of the influential *Leeds Mercury* - was the driving force behind Voluntarism after 1843. Through Baines’s many pamphlets and articles, which combined theoretical arguments with detailed statistics, the case for Voluntarism reached a wide audience throughout Britain.<sup>53</sup>

#### IV

Liberty was a basic concern of all Voluntarists. Dissenters saw themselves in the tradition of John Milton, Algernon Sidney, and John Locke - defenders of individual rights and foes of oppressive government. Religious liberty in particular - freedom of conscience - was viewed as the great heritage of the Dissenting tradition, any violation of which should call forth “stern and indomitable resistance.”<sup>54</sup>

Liberty should not be sacrificed for a greater good, argued the Dissenting minister and Voluntarist Richard Hamilton: “There is no greater good. There can be no greater good! It is not simply means, it is an end.”<sup>55</sup> Education is best promoted by freedom, but should there ever be a conflict, “liberty is more precious than education.” “We love education,” Hamilton stated, “but there are things which we love better.”<sup>56</sup> Edward Baines agreed that education is not the ultimate good: “Liberty is far more precious.” It is essential to “all the virtues which dignify men and communities.”<sup>57</sup>

The preservation of individual freedom, according to most Voluntarists, is the only legitimate function of government. The purpose of government, wrote Herbert Spencer in “The Proper Sphere of Government” (1842), is “to defend the natural rights of man - to protect person and property - to prevent the aggressions of the powerful upon the weak; in a word, to administer justice.” Edward Miall agreed that government is “an organ for the protection of life, liberty, and property; or, in other words, for the administration of justice.”<sup>58</sup>

Government, an ever-present danger to liberty, must be watched with vigilance and suspicion. “The true lover of liberty,” stated the *Eclectic Review*, “will jealously examine all the plans and measures of government.”

He will seldom find himself called to help it, and to weigh down its scale. He will watch its increase of power with distrust. He will specially guard against conceding to it any thing which might be otherwise done. He would deprecate its undertaking of bridges, highways, railroads. He would foresee the immense mischief of its direction of hospitals and asylums. Government has enough on its hands - its own proper functions - nor need it to be overborne. There is a class of governments which are called paternal. . . . They exact a soulless obedience. . . . Nothing breathes and stirs. . . . The song of liberty is forgotten. . . . And when such governments tamper with education, the tyranny, instead of being relieved, is eternized.<sup>59</sup>

Government is “essentially immoral,” wrote Spencer in *Social Statics*, and with this many Voluntarists agreed. A government has only those rights delegated to it by individuals, and “it is for each to say whether he will employ such an agent or not.” Every person, therefore, has “the right to ignore the state.”<sup>60</sup> The source of political authority is the people, argued Hamilton, and the people may revise or even “outlaw the State.”<sup>61</sup>

Voluntarists’ concern for liberty can scarcely be exaggerated. Schemes of state education were denounced repeatedly as “the knell of English freedom,” an “assault on our constitutional liberties,” and so forth. Plans for government inspection of schools were likened to “government *surveillance*” and “universal *espionage*” that display “the *police* spirit.” And compulsory education was described as “child-kidnapping.” Educational freedom is “a sacred thing” because it is “an essential branch of civil freedom.” “A system of state-education,” declared Baines, “is a vast intellectual police, set to watch over the young at the most critical period of their existence, to prevent the intrusion of dangerous thoughts, and turn their minds into safe channels.”<sup>62</sup>

Contrary to later historians, who were to portray Voluntarism as a battle for narrow sectarian

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interests, the Voluntarists insisted that crucial moral and political principles were at stake. "The crisis involves larger interests than those of dissent," stated the *Eclectic Review*. The threat that state education poses to individual freedom is sufficient ground to "take up a position of most determined hostility to it."<sup>63</sup> The Voluntarists often drew parallels between educational freedom, on the one hand, and religious freedom, freedom of the press, and other civil liberties, on the other hand. As Baines noted, "We cannot violate the principles of liberty in regard to education, without furnishing at once a precedent and an inducement to violate them in regard to other matters." He continued:

In my judgment, the State could not consistently assume the support and control of education, without assuming the support and control of both the pulpit and the press. Once decide that Government money and Government superintendence are essential in the schools, whether to insure efficiency, or to guard against abuse, ignorance, and error, and the self-same reasons will force you to apply Government money and Government superintendence to our periodical literature and our religious instruction.<sup>64</sup>

Baines realized that a government need not carry the principle inherent in state education to its logical extreme, but he was disturbed by a precedent that gave to government the power of molding minds. If, as the proponents of state education had argued, state education was required to promote civic virtue and moral character, then "where, acting on these principles, could you consistently stop?" He asked:

Would not the same paternal care which is exerted to provide schools, schoolmasters, and school-books, be justly extended to provide mental food for the adult, and to guard against his food being poisoned? In short, would not the principle clearly justify *the appointment of the Ministers of Religion, and a Censorship of the Press?*<sup>65</sup>

Baines conceded that there were deficiencies and imperfections in the system of voluntary education, but freedom should not be abrogated on this account. Again he pointed to the example of a free press. A free press has many "defects and abuses"; certainly not all the products of a free press are praiseworthy. But if liberty is to be sacrificed in education in order to remedy deficiencies, then why not regulate and censor the press for the same reason? Baines employed this analogy in his brilliant rejoinder to the charge that he was an advocate of "bad schools":

In one sense I am. I maintain that we have as much right to have wretched schools as to have wretched newspapers, wretched preachers, wretched books, wretched institutions, wretched political economists, wretched Members of Parliament, and wretched Ministers. You cannot proscribe all these things without proscribing

Liberty. The man is a simpleton who says, that to advocate Liberty is to advocate badness. The man is a quack and a *doctrinaire* of the worst German breed, who would attempt to force all minds, whether individual or national, into a mould of ideal perfection, - to stretch it out or to lop it down to his own Procrustean standard. I maintain that Liberty is the chief cause of excellence; but it would cease to be Liberty if you proscribed everything inferior. Cultivate giants if you please, but do not stifle dwarfs.<sup>66</sup>

Freedom of conscience was precious to liberal Dissenters, and they feared government encroachment in this realm, even in the guise of "secular" education. The *Eclectic Review*, using arguments similar to those of Baines, stressed the relationship between religious freedom and educational freedom. Advocates of state education claimed that parents have the duty to provide their children with education and that the state has the right to enforce this duty. But parents have a duty to provide religious and moral instruction as well. "Are we then prepared to maintain . . . that government should interpose, in this case, to supply what the parent has failed to communicate? . . . If sound in the one case, it is equally so in the other."<sup>67</sup>

To the many state-school advocates who pointed to the Prussian system as a model, Baines retorted: "Nearly all the Continental Governments which pay and direct the school, pay and direct also the pulpit and the press. They do it consistently."<sup>68</sup> This is the potential "despotism" that Baines feared and loathed.

## V

A common prediction of Voluntarists was that government would employ education for its own ends, especially to instill deference and obedience in citizens. The radical individualist William Godwin, author of *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), was among the first to express this concern. The "project of a national education ought uniformly to be discouraged," he wrote, "on account of its obvious alliance with national Government [which] will not fail to employ it to strengthen its hands, and perpetuate its institutions."<sup>69</sup>

With the consolidation of Dissenting opposition to state education, the Godwinian warning was frequently repeated and elaborated on. This passage from the *Eclectic Review* is typical:

It is no trifling thing to commit to any hands the moulding of the minds of men. An immense power is thus communicated, the tendency of which will be in exact accordance with the spirit and policy of those who use it. Governments, it is well known, are conservative. The tendency of official life is notorious, and it is the height of folly, the mere vapouring of credulity, to imagine that the educational system, if entrusted to the minister of the day, will not be employed to diffuse amongst the rising generation, that spirit

and those views which are most friendly to his policy. By having, virtually, at his command, the whole machinery of education, he will cover the land with a new class of officials, whose dependence on his patronage will render them the ready instruments of his pleasure.<sup>70</sup>

Government education, this writer feared, would produce “an emasculated and servile generation.” A possible advance in literacy would be purchased at the price of man’s “free spirit.” Elsewhere the *Eclectic Review* compared state schools to “barracks” and their employees to “troops.” “The accession of power and patronage to that government which establishes such a national system of education, can scarcely be gauged.”<sup>71</sup> Teachers paid by a government will owe allegiance to that government.

What a host of stipendiaries will thus be created! And who shall say what will be their influence in the course of two generations? All their sympathies will be with the powers by whom they are paid, on whose favor they live, and from whose growing patronage their hopes of improving their condition are derived. As constitutional Englishmen, we tremble at the result. The danger is too imminent, the hazard too great, to be incurred, for any temporary stimulus which government interference can minister to education. We eschew it as alike disastrous in its results and unsound in its theory - the criminal attempt of short-sighted or flagitious politicians, to mold the intellect of the people to their pleasure.<sup>72</sup>

Indoctrination is inherent in state education, according to Edward Baines. State education proceeds from the principle that “it is the duty of a Government to train the Mind of the People.” If one denies to government this right - as defenders of a free press and free religion must logically do - then one must also deny the right of government to meddle in education. It “is not the duty or province of the Government to train the mind of the people,” argued Baines, and this “principle of the highest moment” forbids state education.<sup>73</sup>

Herbert Spencer agreed. State education, he wrote in *Social Statics* (1851), will inevitably involve indoctrination.

For what is meant by saying that a government ought to educate the people? Why should they be educated? What is the education for? Clearly, to fit the people for social life - to make them good citizens. And who is to say what are good citizens? The government: there is no other judge. And who is to say how these good citizens may be made? The government: there is no other judge. Hence the proposition is convertible into this - a government ought to mold children into good citizens, using its own discretion in settling what a good citizen is and how a child may be molded into one.<sup>74</sup>

Indoctrination was an issue that troubled even some proponents of state education. A case in point is William Lovett, the Chartist radical who is frequently praised as an early champion of state education. In his *Address on Education* (1837), Lovett maintained that it is “the duty of Government to establish *for all classes* the best possible system of education.” Education should be provided “not as a charity, *but as a right.*” How was the British government to discharge this duty? By providing funds for the

It is impossible for government to establish State education in Britain [circa 1843] without committing something worse than highway robbery. This is a bold assertion; yet there is nothing more true. We have seen how utterly impracticable it is for the State, by its *unitive scheme*, to impart anything like education to the children of men who differ so widely in their religious, moral, historical, and political opinions. If the State intends to do any good, it must therefore either make a choice of one of the existing religions, or invent one of its own. Let us suppose the choice made, and for the sake of illustration let the Roman Catholic be the favored religion. Of course, no Independent, Churchman, Jew, or Unitarian would in this case consent to send his children to the government school, which nevertheless he would be obliged to support through the national funds, although receiving no benefit from them. Now, would this not be using the property of some for the benefit of others? Would not this be robbery? Yet this is not all. The dissenters, whoever they may be, would be compelled to pay for the education, therefore, the government would really do something worse than the highway robber, for the latter takes your purse only, whereas the former would not only rob you, but actually use your money to propagate tenets and ideas which you might detest and abhor, and which might tend to undermine the sect or party to which you belong.

- Anonymous, REASONS AGAINST GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE IN EDUCATION (1843), reprinted in George H. Smith and Marilyn Moore (eds.), CRITICS OF STATE EDUCATION (2017), pp. 299-300.

erection and maintenance of schools. Lovett desired government financing *without* government control: “we are decidedly opposed to placing such immense power and influence in the hands of Government as that of selecting the teachers and superintendents, the books and kinds of instruction, and the whole management of schools in each locality.” Lovett detested state systems, such as that found in Prussia, “where the lynx-eyed satellites of power . . . crush in embryo the buddings of freedom.” State control of education “prostrates the whole nation before one uniform . . . despotism.”<sup>75</sup>

Several years later Lovett became less sanguine

about the prospect of government financing without government control. While still upholding in theory the duty of government to provide education, he so distrusted his own government that he called on the working classes to reject government proposals and to “commence the great work of education yourselves.” The working classes had “everything to fear” from schools established by their own government, so Lovett outlined a proposal whereby schools could be provided through voluntary means, free from state patronage and control.<sup>76</sup>

We see a similar concern with indoctrination in the work of the celebrated philosopher John Stuart Mill. Mill contended that education “is one of those things which it is admissible in principle that a government should provide for the people,” although he favored a system in which only those who could not afford to pay would be exempt from fees.<sup>77</sup> Parents who failed to provide elementary education for their children committed a breach of duty, so the state could compel parents to provide instruction. But where and how children were taught should be up to the parents; the state should merely enforce minimal educational standards through a series of public examinations. Thus did Mill attempt to escape the frightening prospect of government indoctrination. At this point, he began to sound like an ardent Voluntaryist:

That the whole or any large part of the education of the people should be in State hands, I go as far as any one in deprecating. . . . A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another: and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government . . . in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by a natural tendency to one over the body.<sup>78</sup>

“I am convinced that most of our trouble comes from giving the government the right to tax.”

- R. C. Hoiles in a letter of July 9, 1957 to Spencer Heath (Archive item 2647).

Dissenters who favored state education were also sensitive to the problem of indoctrination, but many thought that the danger could be avoided by confining state schools to secular subjects. The Voluntaryists disagreed, and they repudiated all attempts at compromise. Government aid, however small and innocent at first, was bound to be followed by government strings. Government aid is “a trap and a snare,” declared the *Eclectic Review*. It is “a wretched bribe” that, if accepted, “will have irretrievably disgraced us.”<sup>79</sup> The question is not, “How can we obtain Government money?” wrote Algernon Wells, “but, How can we avoid it?” Wells continued with a fascinating observation:

[Dissenters] must ever be equally free to act

and speak. They must hold themselves entirely clear of all temptation to ask, when their public testimony is required - How will our conduct affect our grants? The belief of many Independents is that, from the hour they received Government money, they would be a changed people - their tone lowered - their spirit altered - their consistency sacrificed - and their honour tarnished.<sup>80</sup>

Perhaps Edward Baines, Jr., best summarized the sentiment of the Voluntaryists: “When Governments offer their arm, it is like the arm of a creditor or a constable, not so easily shaken off: there is a handcuff at the end of it.”<sup>81</sup> The lesson was clear. Educational freedom is incompatible with state support. If government control and manipulation of education are to be avoided, financial independence and integrity must be maintained.

## VI

Another recurring theme of Voluntaryism was the need for diversity in education. Voluntaryists warned that state education would impose a dulling uniformity that would result, at best, in mediocrity. This lack of diversity in education was a primary concern of the 18th-century Dissenter Joseph Priestley. Education is an art, and like any art it requires many “experiments and trials” before it can approach perfection, he noted. To bring government into education would freeze this art at its present stage and thereby “cut off its future growth.” Education “is already under too many legal restraints. Let these be removed.” The purpose of education is not simply to promote the interests of the state but rather to produce “wise and virtuous men.” Progress in this area requires “unbounded liberty, and even caprice.” Life - especially human life - requires diversity to improve. Variety induces innovation and improvement. “From new and seemingly irregular methods of education, perhaps something extraordinary and uncommonly great may spring.” The “great excellence of human nature consists in the variety of which it is capable. Instead, then, of endeavouring, by uniform and fixed systems of education, to keep mankind always the same, let us give free scope to everything which may bid fair for introducing more variety among us.”<sup>82</sup>

Godwin expressed similar concerns. State institutions resist change and innovation. “They actively restrain the flights of mind, and fix it in the belief of exploded errors.” Government bureaucracies entrench themselves and resist change, so we cannot look to them for progress. State education “has always expended its energies in the support of prejudice.”<sup>83</sup>

The deleterious effects of intellectual and cultural uniformity were also of great concern to Herbert Spencer, who developed a theory of social progress based on increasing social diversity. National education “necessarily assumes that a uniform system

of instruction is desirable,” and this Spencer denied. Unlimited variety is the key to progress. Truth itself - “the bright spark that emanates from the collision of opposing ideas” - is endangered by a coerced uniformity. The “uniform routine” of state education will produce “an approximation to a national model.” People will begin to think and act alike, and the youth will be pressed “as nearly as possible into one common mould.” Without diversity and competition among educational systems, education will stagnate and intellectual progress will be severely retarded.<sup>84</sup>

According to Spencer, it is because individuals vary widely in their capacities, needs, and skills that we need a variety of educational systems from which to choose. The flexibility of competing systems allows the individual something suited to his or her individual requirements. This flexibility is provided in a free market where teachers are answerable to the public. Conversely, in a state system, teachers are “answerable only to some superior officer, and having no reputation and livelihood to stimulate them,” they have little motivation to consider the individual needs of their students. Education becomes uniformly gray. Hence “in education as in everything else, the principle of honourable competition is the only one that can give present satisfaction or hold out promise of future perfection.”<sup>85</sup>

Edward Baines also warned that a uniform state education would obstruct progress. It would serve to “stereotype the methods of teaching, to bolster up old systems, and to prevent improvement.” If we left education to the market, we would see continual improvements. “But let it once be monopolized by a Government department, and thenceforth reformers must prepare to be martyrs.”<sup>86</sup> Algernon Wells made a similar point:

How to teach, how to improve children, are questions admitting of new and advanced solutions, no less than inquiries how best to cultivate the soil, or to perfect manufactures. And these improvements cannot fail to proceed indefinitely, so long as education is kept wide open, and free to competition, and to all those impulses which liberty constantly supplies. But once close up this great science and movement of mind from these invigorating breezes, whether by monopoly or bounty, whether by coercion or patronage, and the sure result will be torpor and stagnancy.<sup>87</sup>

The *Eclectic Review*, protesting that the “unitive design” of state education “would make all think alike,” continued with a chilling account of uniformity:


All shall be straightened as by the schoolmaster’s ruler, and transcribed from his copy. He shall decide what may or may not be asked. But he must be *normalized himself*. He must be fashioned

to a model. He shall only be taught particular things. The compress and tourniquet are set on his mind. He can only be suffered to think one way. . . . All schools will be filled with the same books. All teachers will be imbued with the same spirit. And under their cold and lifeless tuition, the national spirit, now warm and independent, will grow into a type formal and dull, one harsh outline with its crisp edges, a mere complex machine driven by external impulse, with its appendages of apparent power but of gross resistance. If any man loves that national monotony, thinks it the just position of his nature, can survey the tame and sluggish spectacle with delight, he, on the adoption of such a system, has his reward.<sup>88</sup>

I think public [i.e., tax-supported] schools are bound to destroy this country because they create public opinion that sanctions and endorses government intervention in an unhampered market.  
- R. C. Hoiles in a letter to Ludwig von Mises, Sept. 7, 1949.

Auberon Herbert also cautioned against the “evils of uniformity.” Like his mentor Herbert Spencer, he thought that “all influences which tend towards uniform thought and action in education are most fatal to any regularly continuous improvement.”<sup>89</sup> Imagine the effect of state uniformity in religion, art, or science. Progress would grind to a halt. Education is no different. “Therefore, if you desire progress, you must not make it difficult for men to think and act differently; you must not dull their sense with routine or stamp their imagination with the official pattern of some great department.”<sup>90</sup>

As a former member of parliament, Herbert was especially sensitive to the difficulty of implementing change in a bureaucratic structure. A free market encourages innovation and risk taking. An innovator with new ideas on education can, if left legally unhampered, solicit aid from those sympathetic to his views and then test his product on the market.

But if some great official system blocks the way, if he has to overcome the stolid resistance of a department, to persuade a political party, which has no sympathy with views holding out no promise of political advantage, to satisfy inspectors, whose eyes are trained to see perfection of only one kind, and who may summarily condemn his school as “inefficient” and therefore disallowed by law, if in the meantime he is obliged by rates and taxes to support a system to which he is opposed, it becomes unlikely that this energy and confidence in his own views will be sufficient to inspire a successful resistance to such obstacles.<sup>91</sup> 

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## Will Durant on “The Political Elements of Civilization”

Man is not willingly a political animal. ... If the average man [many centuries ago] had his way there would probably never have been any state. Even today he resents it, classes death with taxes, and yearns for that government which governs least. If he asks for many laws it is only because he is sure that his neighbor needs them; privately he is an unphilosophical anarchist, and thinks laws in his own case superfluous. [p. 21] ...

It is war that makes the chief, the king and the state, just as it is these that make war. [p. 22] ...

The state is a late development, and hardly appears before the time of written history. ... Time sanctifies everything; even the most arrant theft, in the hands of the robber's grandchildren, becomes sacred and inviolable property. Every state begins in compulsion; but the habits of obedience become the content of conscience, and soon every citizen thrills with loyalty to the flag. [p. 24] ...

[T]he state may be defined as internal peace for external war. Men decided that it was better to pay taxes than to fight among themselves; better to pay tribute to one magnificent robber than to bribe them all. ...

A state which should rely upon force alone would soon fall, for though men are naturally gullible they are also naturally obstinate, and power, like taxes,

succeeds best when it is invisible and indirect. Hence the state, in order to maintain itself, used and forged many instruments of indoctrination – the family, the church, the school – to build in the soul of the citizen a habit of patriotic loyalty and pride. This saved a thousand policemen, and prepared the public mind for that docile coherence which is indispensable in war. Above all, the ruling minority sought more and more to transform its forcible mastery into a body of law which, while consolidating that mastery, would afford a welcome security and order to the people, and would recognize the rights of the subject sufficiently to win his acceptance of the law and adherence to the state. [p. 25] ...

To violate [the] law is to win the admiration of half the populace, who secretly envy anyone who can outwit this ancient enemy; to violate custom is to incur almost universal hostility. For custom rises out of the people, whereas law is forced upon them from above; law is usually a decree of the master, but custom is the natural selection of those modes of action that have been found the most convenient in the experience of the group. Law partly replaces custom ... [b]ut the replacement is never complete; in the determination and judgment of human conduct, custom remains to the end the force behind the law, the power behind the throne, the last “magistrate of men's lives.” [pp. 26-27]

- Will Durant, THE STORY OF CIVILIZATION (1954), Volume I. V

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