



The Underground History of American Education: An Intimate Investigation Into the Prison of Modern Schooling

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History of American Education

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From Reader Review **The Underground History of American Education: An Intimate Investigation Into the Prison of Modern Schooling** for online ebook

Vikas Erraballi says

Should have put published the three volumes as one book.

Chad says

John Taylor Gatto's *The Underground History Of American Education* is freely available online, although not in the most convenient form imaginable. It is not particularly well written and the text seems to meander somewhat randomly through a variety of topics, but the ideas within are worth considering.

I do not agree with Gatto's version of American exceptionalism, nor his belief (endemic among Libertarians, of which I am one) that highly successful people like Ben Franklin and George Washington were not an exception, but the rule among people free of government interference. Gatto also seems to talk out of both sides of his mouth on several issues, such as remarking on the way strict authoritarianism stifles the spirit while bemoaning the legal inability of contemporary teachers to discipline their students. He makes strong statements without providing justification, uses anecdotes as evidence, and harangues the reader with his own political philosophy.

I find some of the idea of a vast philosophy of statism and corporatism designing schools to produce dumb, compliant workers and consumers a bit too much to swallow. But not all of it. Too many of my own experiences match up too perfectly with what he is saying, and that is in spite of the fact that I think I attended quite a good public school and was part of what Gatto would call the Gifted caste destined to become great social managers. School does indeed consist of a great many arbitrary rules and punishments, and any illusions that students have the power to influence policy or seek redress are just that. I will not presume to know intentions, but I have no doubt that this does have the effect of ingraining Pavlovian obedience in some (and near-total disregard for authority in others). The rights of citizens, visitors, and even illegal aliens to the United States are generally not extended to students while on school property or during school hours, and school systems have been given or have taken authority far beyond their walls. (Should I really need a permit from my principal to work on weekends? In Pennsylvania, at least, I do.) Much of schoolwork is meaningless, and it nearly has convinced someone like myself that quite fascinating things are really tedious.

I mostly agree with the heart of the broader societal implications as well. Children and young adults are definitely more capable (physically, intellectually, emotionally, etc) than society generally gives them credit for. I do recall that as a child some of the best fun was being allowed to do "grown-up" stuff. People do seem to be consumers first and citizens second. I've never before heard the idea that part of the reason for the growth of management as a profession is that there is just not enough actual work left to be done. That sounds absurd with hungry people and crumbling infrastructure, but I can see it making some twisted sense to a macroeconomist. (The possibility that the continued profitability of food production depends on people starving is a topic for another day.)

If you can make it through the blustering, this is definitely a thought-provoking read. If you are interested in examining unorthodox perspectives on one of the pillars of modern society, this would be an excellent place to start.

Ann says

I read this book a number of years ago and was blown away. The book is written by a former public school teacher ... he taught in the public school system of NY City. He has extensively researched the history of public education in America and put it together in an amazing expose. He chronicles how socialist/communist influences have been encroaching into the agenda of public education for YEARS. Some of the conclusions he arrives at seem a bit like "conspiracy theories" and yet if even half of what he talks about is true, KEEP YOUR CHILDREN NEAR YOU ... GO HOMESCHOOL MOMS !!!

Christopher says

Very easy to read, hard to stomach, and impossible to refute. I battle daily at home what my children bring home from school. Minus one star for overkill. Can be read online here - <http://www.johntaylorgatto.com/chapters/>

Whoever controls the image and information of the past determines what and how future generations will think; whoever controls the information and images of the present determines how those same people will view the past.

— George Orwell, "1984" (1949)

Take at hazard one hundred children of several educated generations and one hundred uneducated children of the people and compare them in anything you please; in strength, in agility, in mind, in the ability to acquire knowledge, even in morality—and in all respects you are startled by the vast superiority on the side of the children of the uneducated.

— Count Leo Tolstoy, "Education and Children" (1862)

Rob says

six stars. where do i click to give six stars?

i don't even know how to convey the wonderfulness of this book. john taylor gatto taught 8th grade english for 30 years in NYC. in his final few years he was named NYC and NY State Teacher of the Year. then he quit in disgust, his resignation letter ending up published in the Wall Street Journal. he quit because he finally realised that universal compulsory schooling does ghastly harm to every human life it consumes. after he quit, he did 10 years of frantic research to find out how such a system could have come into existence. this book is so well researched, it blew me away.

yes, it's about the history of education, but it's also about the history of american business, about the meaning of life, about politics, bureaucracy, philosophy, psychology, good and evil, the genius of the western outlook,

utopianism, progressivism, fabianism, eugenics, phrenology, and so much more.

maybe what best conveys my love of this book is the fact that i plan to write a letter to the author. i have never written a letter to an author in my life.

the book can actually be read free online, in its entirety, at <http://www.johntaylorgatto.com/chapte...>

Christi says

I was so angry when I read this book. I realized I have been robbed of an education. I am changing that now.

John Schneider says

"You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes." - "The Matrix"

John Taylor Gatto's "An Underground History of American Education" stands as one of the most potent "red pills" ever created. Reading this book will challenge almost every belief that you have ever held. Thinking about what Gatto relates in this book will cause you to grapple with what it means to be human and happy. Understanding the implications of this book will lead you to question both your own sanity and the world's. "A must read" hardly does this book credit.

In "An Underground History" Gatto attempts to sketch the development of modern schooling, its roots, and its pernicious effects upon America. Drawing from numerous primary sources as well as his own three decades teaching, Gatto contends that modern schooling is a control apparatus that has run amok. More particularly, Gatto claims that modern schooling was begun by a variety of interests that saw education as the way to control the world by inculcating mass consumption. Accordingly, schools function to teach students to obey, conform, and consume instead of question, analyze, and innovate.

If you would like to read a book that explains why so many people are unhappy with life, read this book. If you would like to understand why so many students hate learning, read this book. If you want to see what American education is really about, read this book. You will not be disappointed.

Kaethe says

No, thank you. Schools do not need more input from religion, the community, or the family. As an example of this folly, I give you: sex education, where the US has the highest rate of teen pregnancy of any industrialized nation; where community and religious standards lead to abstinence-only programs which are not only free of actual facts, but actively promote doctrine which is demonstrably false, leading to the highest rate of STDs among teens in any industrialized nation. Frankly, anyone who calls modern US public education "prison" is an historical idiot, and would do well to spend 12 or 16 hour days down a mine or working in a sweatshop, or as a slave picking cotton, or perhaps in a workhouse, or just starving on the streets.

Melinda says

Simply THE best book on what is going on in the American educational system, and why it is the way it is. John Taylor Gatto has the credentials to speak to this. He lived the life of a teacher in New York City, and was named Teacher of the Year on 3 different occasions. He quit his teaching job when he decided he didn't want to hurt children anymore, and he saw the results of the public education system on his students.

He provides a stunning and well documented history of why education is the way it is in America. HIGHLY HIGHLY recommended. I re-read this book from time to time, just to remember what the goal in educating our children really SHOULD be.

Check out his website at <http://www.johntaylorgatto.com/underg...> for more articles and more information.

Marisa says

I'm a little disenchanted with this book, I will probably be disowned from the Homeschooling world for this review, but here it goes. I thought it had some really good/interesting points, some great figures such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin became great men without formal schooling. Literacy rates went down when kids were required to go to public school. Men like Carnegie and Rockefeller did promote and fund public education to help "produce" workers, not thinkers. Teachers can do a lot of damage to kids, I still hate to sing when there is a chance that someone other than my husband or kids may hear me. Thanks a lot ZANE BARRA, (7th grade choir teacher). There are definately problems with the public school system.

BUT....

On the other hand, despite the system, I know that there are some great educators out there that are really making a difference in the lives of children. Just ONE example is my brother-in-law Chris. He is an amazing teacher that continually makes his kids think, makes lessons interesting and exciting, and really cares about each and every child. There are a lot of kids that thrive in the public school system, and it isn't all bad. I kind of got sick of hearing how terrible the public school system is, I have a child going to public school. Not everyone has the opportunity or means to send their children to private school or homeschool. John Gatto knows his audience and knows that they want to hear everything that is wrong with the system. Yes there are problems, but there are good things about it too. It is not going to ruin every child.

Joseph Lumbard says

As I read this book, I kept saying to myself, "Oh my God!" So much of what is in here explains the frustrations that I experienced as child. As a parent I now see how the school system has come to exist for itself rather than for its students, despite (as Gatto rightly points out) the good intentions of many excellent teachers and even administrators who are themselves frustrated by "the system." As an educator, I am distressed to see the way in which the institutional illnesses of which Gatto writes are now creeping into the universities.

Gatto's book is ultimately a call to take the education of those you love into your own hands. It does not provide "a solution" because the issue is really one of finding your own solution, since real education is a matter of self-direction.

Ultimately, the book is a bit rambling and Gatto does seem to display some modern-secularist misunderstandings regarding certain aspects of religious teachings. In this respect, the book falls short. Nonetheless, in terms of his analysis of how the system is actually working now and how this "dysfunction" serves the interests of corporate America, this book contains information of which we all should be aware.

Heather says

Book online at the author's website

Ah, for the good old days, back before child labor laws, back when no had time for such inventions as "adolescence", back when one could sing a cute song about darkies or niggers without being a racist, back when flogging children in the name of civility was a good thing, though Gatto seems to be of mixed opinion about his own whipping for mispronouncing French verbs.

This book could have started in Chapter 17 and made many of the same points without the self-indulgence of the previous 16 chapters of "research". Then again, such is the world of self-publishing.

I agree that the American school system is far from ideal. Most people I know would agree that the one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work for many. There's no accommodation of different developmental schedules for different children, different learning styles, different personalities. The current "epidemic" of ADHD and similar "disorders" indicates that we have pathologized a normal aspect of childhood behavior. Bullying is tolerated, conformity is required. We have devalued vocational education, relegating it to kids who are considered "too stupid" to make it on the college track, by which we also devalue university education by making it an expectation for everyone.

Several of the suggestions Gatto makes in the very last subchapter even make sense. And I love this description of school administrators: "Their job isn't about children; it's about systems maintenance."

But overall, this book is a collection of anecdotes, irrelevancies, and faulty logic presented as a coherent treatise.

Much of my criticism is also commonly leveled against many critics of conventional education. Not every parent or set of parents has the skill and income level for homeschooling or unschooling. And it's very impractical to get education in subjects the parents may not be able to cover without attending a classroom, presumably in an institution of learning. A parent who can homeschool well can also steer and support all but the most square of pegs through the conventional school system.

Not all schools are the bureaucratic extreme Gatto describes; I'd venture to say most aren't. Mine wasn't, and mine was hardly the epitome of progressive schooling. And most kids I knew seemed to come from similar schools to mine, Gatto's pile of fan mail notwithstanding.

Gatto claims that the school system makes us a nation of drones. I defy him to prove that today's society is any less drone-like, for the average person, than anything else that has come along before. A few anecdotes

about successful self-educated people from days of yore doesn't mean that the average person's life was any less dreary than it is today, any more than a few anecdotes about people thriving in today's system should prove to Gatto that he's all wet.

Homeschooling will not make everyone "Benjamin Franklin, the Wright brothers, Thomas Edison, or Henry Ford". In the days before compulsory education, most people were not "Benjamin Franklin, the Wright brothers, Thomas Edison, or Henry Ford". Not everyone left to their own or their parents' devices will become a great scholar. Not every child can be counted on to create an unschooling program that will really get them what they need. Some people really are lazy. Some simply lack the big picture. And we no longer have the kind of culture or economy where there's a lot of room for the uneducated. The industrial revolution can't be reversed. Big capitalism is here to stay too.

Sure, we've had some crappy societies since the advent of compulsory education in the U.S. and Europe. Institutional racism, McCarthyism, the worse aspects of Communism...but it's not like there weren't crappy societies before. Feudalism? Slavery, hardly something to be blamed on compulsory education? Can we blame the Asian sex trade on compulsory education too?

Gatto doesn't much care for higher education either. And he makes a particular point of slamming the Seven Sisters. Institutionalized education is bad enough; apparently institutionalized education for women is that much worse.

One of Gatto's most egregious bits of rhetoric is his linking the charter school movement to "the same institutional consciousness which once sent river ironclads full of armed detectives to break the steel union at Homestead, machine-gunned strikers at River Rouge, and burned to death over a dozen women and children in Ludlow". And he dares complain about propagandizing in schools? One would think he'd be in favor of the charter school movement, as a lessening of institutionalization and a return to more local control of schools, but I suppose at this point it's homeschooling/unschooling or nothing for him.

Then again, throughout the book there is a thread of bias, mostly Christian, and particularly Catholic, with just the right dash of libertarian fear of the New World Order. (Gatto describes himself as a lapsed Roman Catholic, but he doesn't seem to have lapsed far.)

For instance, Gatto makes a point of linking modern-day Planned Parenthood to Margaret Sanger's views on eugenics. There is a historical link, to be sure, but what is the point of bringing up Planned Parenthood at all, in a book on education? A snarky aside about free condoms is more evidence of his bias against birth control, though he does mention completely neutrally that his mother had an abortion (in an autobiographical section of questionable relevance). Then there's the abrupt by-the-way dismissal of Kinsey as "bogus" with no further discussion.

Gatto bemoans the omission of the religious beliefs of various important scientists in the teaching of science. And the omission of religion from school, in general. But in this day of creationism returning to the classroom, I hardly think de-religionizing is much of a concern, not to mention that taking religion out of schools is NOT the same thing as taking religion out of people's lives.

He claims that religion was removed from schools because "spiritually contented" people can't be controlled. Apparently the control that churches exert over the "spiritually contented" is just fine. He also goes back to that same old argument that only religious people have a moral code.

He rants about just about every foundational aspect of our society (including the pursuit of happiness) and yet

goes on to talk about the "natural genius of the United States".

In addition to tried-and-true anti-UN implications, Gatto also makes sure to inform us about the great Quaker conspiracy. You see, private schools are disproportionately run by Episcopalians and Quakers. No mention of how the Catholic school industry, except in the above-mentioned autobiographical segment. And that's not to mention the contaminating thread of the Old Norse Religion ("the only known major religion to have no ethical code other than pragmatism") that apparently runs through our educational system. Let us not forget, also, that leadership, sportsmanship, courage, disdain for hardship, team play, and devotion to duty are pagan values. Also, only "western religion" (whatever that is, since the Quakers and Anglicans are or at least used to be out to get us) "grant[s] dignity and responsibility to ordinary individuals, not elites".

Lest he appear biased, though, Gatto adds in a footnote that "The reader is expressly cautioned not to infer that I mean to imply Buddhism is either hedonistic or without moral foundation." If he hadn't written a paragraph that pretty much implied exactly that, he wouldn't need the footnote.

There are more bizarre claims, like how school makes kids forget how they learned to walk and talk. I doubt that most homeschooled kids remember those events either. He also states that dissecting frogs leads to being willing accomplices to the humiliation of classmates.

Random bits of irrelevant information are scattered throughout the book. His one-clause stand against our Social Security system is irrelevant to his case. And a footnote informs us that half a million school trips have been made to the Bronx zoo. Is this supposed to be further evidence of the ills of public schools that they contaminate their pupils by exposure to a facility founded by a racist? Or just an irrelevant footnote? Does it matter that the foreword to a racist book was written by a man who also wrote textbooks used in the 1950s? Does it matter that USC was founded by another racist? (And by "racist" here I mean a very large segment of the intellectual class of the 1920s.) Are we to judge Ford automobiles by the anti-semitic views of the company's founder going back a century?

Or are these irrelevant bits of agenda just lack of editing, and the arrogance that publishing without an editor implies? Even a proofreader would have helped with mis-numbered and misplaced footnotes, but Gatto couldn't be bothered.

And with all his fondness for footnotes, Gatto doesn't give evidence for claims that "a number of old-family Anglo-Saxons still consider themselves to be the real Jews", or that one of every 15 American millionaires is a dropout. His footnote collection does not include a cite for a Harvard study showing the poor have better diets than the rich. (I ain't sayin' there wasn't one, but looking online, all I found were studies showing the opposite.)

In a more bizarre use of footnoting, he gives a quote attributed to the Caliph Umar, and then he calls the quote's authenticity into question with a footnote. What's the point? Putting in something he knows isn't true, justifying it with a footnote, all the while hoping his readers will skip the footnotes? Getting the statement into the reader's unconscious just before "Your honor, I object"?

It's an indictment of my own obsessive personality that I finished the book and wrote this review, but there you have it.

T. P. Alexanders says

Could anything be more frightening than a book documenting with infinite annotation and footnote the brainwashing of American youth for the purposes of making a more compliant society? I don't think so. This is a must read for every American left that can still think for themselves. Even if you don't have the money to buy a copy, because you can read it for free here.

You can also have the book read to you by the incomparable Lyn Gerry at *Unwelcome Guests* episodes about 317-372. Check out this link.

Elizabeth says

This book really opens your eyes to some of the major forces behind mass education--essentially, social Darwinists and corporations (Rockefeller foundation). Anyone who teaches can see the effects for themselves--kids who aren't lucky enough to have literate parents don't read, hate reading, and the movements in education have played a large role, whole language theory being only one of the causes. The author's train of thought is a bit hard to follow, but there are enough hard facts and historical proof to show why American education ranks so low, and why more testing and government money isn't the solution.

Chris Pisarczyk says

P. 65 "Growth and mastery come only to those who vigorously self direct. Initiating, creating, doing, reflecting, freely associating, enjoying privacy--these are precisely what the structures of schooling are set up to prevent."

P. 98 Dr. Seuss on writing the Cat in the Hat for a textbook publisher from a list of 223 words.

P. 117 "Process kids like sardines and don't be surprised when they come out oily and dead."

P. 182 "The truth is that America's unprecedented global power and spectacular material wealth are a direct product of a third-rate educational system, upon whose inefficiency in developing intellect and character they depend. If we educate better we could not sustain the corporate utopia we have made. Schools build national wealth by tearing down personal sovereignty, morality, and family life. It was a trade-off."

P.197 "Think of coalmines as vast experimental laboratories of human behavior testing the proposition that men, women, and children will do virtually anything--even allow themselves to be consigned to damp dangerous tunnels under the ground for all sunlight hours in order to have real work to do as part of the community of mankind."

P. 203 "Before his sudden death I watched my beloved bachelor friend and long-time fellow schoolteacher Martin Wallach slowly surrender to forces of massification he had long resisted. One day in his late fifties he said, "There isn't any reason to go out anymore. They send food in; I have three hundred channels. Everything is on TV. I couldn't see it all if I had two lifetimes. With my telephone and modem I can get anything. Even girls. There's only trouble outside anyway."

p. 204 Chapter criticizing scientific management and Industrial Engineering, my major.

P.232 "The immense edifice of teacher instruction and schooling in general rests on the shaky hypothesis that expert intervention in childhood produces better people than might otherwise occur. I've come to doubt that."

P. 289 on corporate charitable foundations

P.302 Elasticity
