ROBERT McCLINTOCK:

# Universal Voluntary Study

*Compulsory schooling is an "outworn system" that is "doomed to malfunction"*

When schools become the dominant educational institution, they become pedagogically perverse — or so influential critics contend. Hence, the perennial plea for scholastic reform is now being transformed into a call for the de-schooling of society. If this call is to become more than a critical fad, it will have to culminate in a suspension, or at least a revision, of compulsory education laws, for these are the legal mandates requiring that the young be inducted into the schooled society.

Whether one favors or opposes the de-schooling of society, one should recognize that the present system of required schooling exists because people everywhere perceive that it serves important purposes, both collective and personal. Collectively, conventional wisdom holds that a well-educated populace constitutes the foundation of political stability, economic growth, social well-being, and military power; hence everywhere governments have mobilized their resources to improve the education of their people. Personally, most believe that to find a niche in society they need to accept the minimum knowledge the state insists upon and exploit the educational opportunities open to them. However desirable they may be pedagogically then, efforts to suspend compulsory education laws will probably fail politically unless the proponents of change can demonstrate that there are better ways for the community to fulfill its responsibility for universal education.

No such demonstration has yet appeared — in part because the critics have been so preoccupied with the abuse of schools that the search for a more varied public education has been too narrow. With de-schooling, the school, ironically, remains supreme in the effort to circumscribe it. This obsession with the school, for or against, distorts how we understand the question of compulsory education: we think immediately of compulsory schooling and of the laws stipulating that all children shall attend schools that teach a state-mandated minimum curriculum. Hence, efforts to revise provisions for compulsory education narrow down to questions of changing the school-leaving age and reforming both the minimum curriculum and the methods used to teach it.

These legal parameters however need not define the issue, for just as schools are only one among many agencies of education, compulsory schooling laws are only a small part of a community's actual involvement in compulsory education. By attending to this larger process, a basis may be found for a revision of the laws.

Whatever the laws, education is vitally compulsory. This is not to say that to get ahead in life a person needs a particular kind of education. Rather, it is to say something much more fundamental: to live is to be compelled to acquire an education, be it good or bad, adequate or insufficient. Life *is* a compulsory

education. There are no exceptions to this law. The child is born immature. To live, he must give himself form; he must learn continuously; he must acquire the makings of a sage or a fool, a saint or a sinner, a citizen or a subversive, a hero or some variant of the muddling mean. And the community is deeply involved in this education.

Although every man continuously undergoes a compulsory education in which he is the central, active agent, no one acquires his education in isolation. Even in very primitive circumstances, it is a predominantly social process, driven by man's need to involve himself with others, comprising the acquisition of common languages, customs, techniques, and aspirations. It is "individualized" through each man's personal response to his manifold involvements with others. Man is a political animal for the simple reason that to live he must accept his education in the company of other men. Even the hermit defines himself not by the mere absence of other people but by his active rejection of them. And in this example of the hermit, in which a man decides that involvement with others is a pernicious influence on his person, we have an intimation of the primary responsibility of the community in education.

Profound educational effects result from the social circumstances that each experiences. Hence, in an enlightened community efforts will not be spared to make these circumstances as elevating as possible. More than anything else, the character of each person's compulsory education is infused into him by the diverse public realities pressing upon him. Birth itself is undoubtedly experienced as a demanding disruption, one to which the infant, accepting the pressing air into its empty lungs, must desperately respond. Throughout life, complicated social circumstances thereafter press upon him like the air, forcing themselves upon his unformed character.

Each person is born to particular parents, who possess a definite station at a particular time and place, who strive to solve certain challenges by means of their peculiar capacities. Compelled to begin from a definite point in time and space, each person ineluctably meets his mother tongue, social customs, civic aspirations, class expectations, religious beliefs, ethical dispositions, basic style of life — all of which he must let be pressed upon him before he can try to transform his personality according to a consciously chosen pattern.

Early in our educational heritage, we Americans came aware that this compulsory education through enculturation provided the basis for active initiative in the making and remaking of law, custom, culture, and public policy. Long before there were compulsory education laws, all laws were a part of compulsory education. As a consequence, such theorists as Plato perceived the importance of judging all legislation, customs, and efforts to persuade, by their educational effect, to see what a well-intentioned man would be likely to learn from the various principles and practices he would encounter in the school of life.

As long as political theorists aspired to bring into being the good citizen who might populate the good state, pedagogical concerns were central in it. As political theorists have given place to political scientists, however, the Platonic concern for the character of the good citizen has been eclipsed by a Machiavellian interest in getting and keeping power; and in the United States not since the founding fathers has there been much profound comment on the educational effect of the polity on those who mature within it.

History does not wait upon scholarly fashions, however; and it is an irony, perhaps a portentous one, that while concern for the educational effect of public practice waned, the educational power of that practice waxed. During the twentieth century, men experienced a marked expansion of government and other institutions in the realms of economics, health, religion, philanthropy, and learning. At the same time, they experienced the rapid development of mass media. Consequently, the press of public affairs on each person became much stronger. There are still, to be sure, *idiotes*, people who are insensitive to public questions; but even these form themselves in the presence of public affairs, living in decaying housing, cursing the bureaucracies, fearing the absence of a corner cop while hating his arrogant presence. Thus, even those who somehow escape the news still form themselves, well or badly, through an intimate involvement with the community. And since for almost all, such existential entanglements are reinforced by a many-sided intellectual pressure — from TV and radio news, the newspapers, the political campaigns, public-relations and advertising drives, and charitable crusades — public affairs have become a more important element than ever before in compulsory education.

Furthermore, the present prominence given to public affairs increases the likelihood that the average man will extract one or another moral from his day-to-day experience. In times past, a man could ascribe much of what he experienced, when it served

either to elevate or demean him, to either good or bad fortune. But now almost everything that happens in the public realm is supposed to happen under the sway of policy. Now a man must see everything as purposeful. If he experiences almost everything he meets as an insidious assault on his integrity, he cannot be expected to learn from it the virtue of stoic fortitude in the face of innocent misfortunes. He will learn instead a drugged despair over his powerlessness or a brutal resentment against his exploitation.

How this vitally compulsory education is faring in contemporary America is largely a mystery. There is a chronic ignorance about the way people, in their day-to-day self-education, are responding to their experiences with government, business, labor, religion, philanthropy, and mass communications. What principles concerning the conduct of life do people adopt as a result of their constant exposure to the symbols exploited in advertising? What do they conclude from their experience of how prejudices are mobilized in politics? What lessons do they learn from the examples set by public officials on every level? What expectations do they form from the physical signs of wealth and poverty embodied in our buildings, means of transport, and fashions? What practices do they countenance after growing accustomed to the conventions that lead to advancement? One need not be a misanthrope to feel that much in our public world is not suited to bringing out the best in people, yet it is a powerful educator of the public, with great effects whether we like them or not.

Of course, the effect of the civic surroundings on any particular person is not rigorously determinative. Some will be neutral, some will elevate, some will degrade. Different individuals will play these influences off against each other in different ways. Some men will seem to surmount the most corrupting surroundings while others will dissipate themselves in the midst of sparkling advantages. Yet, overall, a degrading social climate will corrupt those who are compelled to educate themselves within it and open themselves to its influences; in contrast, an elevating community will draw out the better potentialities in those fortunate to find it pressing in upon them.

In any community where there is a vital concern for the quality of the compulsory education that life imposes on its members, there will be a steady effort to make the social circumstances that each experiences as inspiring as possible. To what degree American civic life is now experienced as degrading or as elevating must be left as moot. Suffice it to observe that wherever the over-all civic influence is degrading, even the best provisions for formal education will probably have little constructive effect; wherever the contribution is elevating, even mediocre schooling opportunities may elicit significant achievements.

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If life makes education compulsory, compulsory schooling may be a rather redundant, ineffective means toward the human and social ends identified with it. Compulsory schooling laws were initiated at a time when many were still living precariously in a subsistence economy. It seemed that unless the state provided schools and required all to attend, many youths would be forced into the marketplace, never to receive an elementary grounding in the skills of self-improvement. Mass school systems were built up; first, for the sake of the young as individuals who needed cultural skills to get ahead or even hold their own; second, for the sake of the community, which needed an educated citizenry in order to flourish economically, politically, socially, militarily.

Compulsion for its own sake was by no means the end; nor was schooling itself. Rather the goals were universal literacy, a general development of intellectual skills, and the dissemination of a humane culture. Even with the first of these aims, the relatively clear-cut goal of making literacy universal, compulsory schooling has proved to be only partly effective, for the goal has been approached but it is nowhere achieved. As a means toward the pedagogic ends with which it is identified, compulsory schooling is a solution that would best befit a community in which many were living on the brink of subsistence and needed to have a modicum of leisure imposed upon their young.

Times have changed. Even those in poverty have idle time to spend, and the economy produces a tremendous surplus over universal subsistence. Yet, our investments in popular education are still founded on the policy of universal, compulsory schooling. This policy required for its implementation the creation of the academic ladder, the segregation of students by age, and their lockstep progression through a minimum sequence of subjects. And with the tangible existence of a school system based upon it, the sequence of grades has been reified into an apparent work of nature.

The lockstep has come to trample on the pedagogical imagination. In the education that life compels, first things *do* come first, but what these are de-

pends on the experiences of the person. For all but the deaf and dumb the first thing is the mother tongue ·nd for a great many the second major matter is in- ed the three R's, but this is not necessarily the case if we look at the anomalies. Some are well on the way to being accomplished actors long before they learn to read or write; others find the elements in gymnastics, the concert piano, chess, cultivating flowers, breeding chickens, or constructing castles in the sand. In each person's life there is indeed a sequence in his education, but it is not necessarily embodied in the official scholastic curriculum, nor is it identical for all.

By renouncing the lockstep and accepting the principle that a sound education can follow many different paths, we begin to look for different means toward the goals traditionally identified with compulsory schooling. This search for a new means is not the oft-pursued search for an alternative to schools. Schools exist because they have a function proper to them, and insofar as they serve this function there is no alternative to them. The search is for an alternative to compulsory schooling, a better set of provisions by which the community can promote literacy, intellectual skills, and a common culture. The search, thus, is for an alternative conception of how the com- ·nity should exercise its responsibility with respect to the formal education of the people.

The way to find this alternative is to reverse the present system. Rather than be compulsory, the alternative system should be voluntary; rather than schooling in a minimum curriculum, it should permit study, through diverse agencies, of a maximum curriculum; rather than being imposed on all children of a specific age, it should be open to everyone, young and old. For the moment, let us take up this alternative hypothetically.

☐ Could a community provide the institutional resources to make possible universal, comprehensive, life-long, voluntary study for its people, resources by which each person would throughout his life find open to him a real opportunity to study any subject that he should choose up to the highest level he could master?

☐ Were a community to make such provisions and refrain from any effort to compel all to reach one or another minimum achievement, what would be the ults with respect to the rate of literacy, the achievement of intellectual skills, the humaneness and universality of culture?

These questions are too enormous to answer here with anything but a statement of faith: such a system could be created and its results would be much better than those of our present system. In affluent societies there is sufficient wealth for the state to stop requiring a minimum curriculum and to begin offering a maximum curriculum. And because education is *vitally* compulsory, people will not ignore their opportunities, but rather, given maximum opportunities untrammeled by legal requirements, will choose their own way and achieve much more than do those who now have only moderate opportunities keyed to a required minimum.

Beyond such statements of faith, the precise features and results of universal voluntary study cannot be foreknown, for they would depend on what people chose to study. Hence, a fundamental requirement of institutional mechanics for the system would be that in their particulars the opportunities offered should be highly responsive to the wishes of the clients. But leaving aside questions of institutional mechanics, except for this one crucial requirement, we might speculate on the general types of studies people might desire, in order to form a rough idea of what it might entail in practice.

Provisions for early education would probably not be too unlike those we presently have. In the absence of compulsory schooling laws, the choice of what children should study would revert to their parents, and most parents would probably choose some form of elementary schooling for their children. But concomitantly, given the choice, they would probably induce a greater variety of schools than now exists. Furthermore, in addition to demanding a diversity of schools, a significant number would desire the availability through television of a really good elementary curriculum, facilitating home education and the creation for children of special-interest groups in all sorts of areas.

Then, provisions for the education of adolescents, who would begin to choose their studies for themselves, would probably diversify considerably from the existing system. Significant numbers might seek early entry into the labor force through apprenticeship study. Many would seek a predominantly academic training not unlike that now available, although the frequency of intense, early specialization might well increase. In addition, some might concentrate early on the performing arts, others on sports, some on

what are frequently considered hobbies. And a number might drift, studying little or nothing and searching instead for a good time. With a system of comprehensive voluntary study, opportunities for secondary education would not be experienced by adolescents as a now-or-never matter. It might even be healthier if a lower percentage of the age group opted for formal instruction. With the new system, those who dropped out would find no difficulty returning later, more mature and richer in experience; with a sense of purpose, they would profit more from their opportunities.

The colleges and the professional and graduate schools would probably be much as they now are, although provisions would be made to accommodate more interested and qualified adults. Admissions criteria would be greatly broadened to oblige those whose previous course of study deviated from the now-sovereign scholastic ladder. On the higher level, too, there might be the establishing of numerous problem-oriented centers where people who wanted to devote themselves to particular public issues could gather.

In actualizing the principle of universal voluntary study, the opportunities for adult education would pullulate. Under the present system of compulsory schooling, the major responsibility of the state is to impose once and for all a minimum curriculum upon all the young. But with the principle of voluntary study the responsibility of the state would be to provide everyone with real opportunities for life-long education. (Only in this way, it seems to me, can the allocation of resources to post-secondary education become egalitarian, rather than persist in the present regressive redistribution of tax revenues from the poor to the middle and upper classes.) If the state were to do this, free evening classes would become available on every possible subject in every locality; an adult apprenticeship system might develop, facilitating career changes in mid-course; music, theater, and all manner of special-interest groups might become educational centers; correspondence courses and educational TV might become far more socially significant than they are now.

Over-all, were such a system created, it would probably match the present one as a means of spreading literacy. What is lost by renouncing compulsion is recovered by providing people with multiple chances. As a means of developing intellectual skills it would be considerably superior, for it would first allow much better use of the principle of the readiness to learn than compulsory schooling does, and it would also provide a greater proportion of the people with a greater variety of opportunities over a far longer period of time than our present educational institutions do.

Provisions for universal, voluntary study would not impose pedagogically a common culture, but then neither has compulsory schooling been able to do that. And taking culture, not as a least common denominator, but as a vital tension between diverse excellences, each of which has been consciously brought to a high level of fulfillment, voluntary study would conduce to a much more developed culture than does compulsory schooling.

A voluntary system would have two other effects. It would break the scholastic lockstep that is used to certify the qualifications people possess; as a result, prospective employers would have to consider more closely, not the institutional credentials, but the actual personal qualities of would-be employees.

More importantly, insofar as open study would broaden access to specialized knowledge, it would significantly democratize access to power in our society.

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With this observation, however, we begin to encounter the difficulties. There are certain political difficulties in any effort to establish a program of voluntary study. Replacing the present system of compulsory schooling with a new one of universal study is much more than pursuing old pedagogical ends through other means. It involves making basic changes in the social system, furnishing new answers to the old question of who gets what, when, and why.

To begin, provisions for voluntary study would be very costly, and any society that made them would be fundamentally revising its public priorities.

Further, in creating operational means for providing all with complete opportunities for study, the equilibrium that has been struck, if it may be called such, with respect to the strong racial, class, and religious tensions in our society would be upset, creating dangers of civic strife.

These difficulties and dangers do not prima facie make the innovations undesirable. Rather it brings us back to the larger matter, the way the community itself educates its members. Whether through compulsory schooling or in voluntary study, the way the state is involved in education is an undertaking of such magnitude that it has become a significant fea-

ture in our social surroundings. For the sake of raising the tone of our civic life, in order to infuse it with a renewed sense of shared purpose, it may be essential that we set about to redefine the educational responsibilities of the state toward its people.

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We Americans have entered a period in which our public affairs have a degrading influence on whoever becomes deeply involved in them, regardless of the level of the involvement. This degradation does not result because the present is so much worse than the past. It occurs because we have lost our sense of a common future, and with that our sense of a shared purpose. The managerial revolution has been complete; pragmatists occupy every seat of power; expediently, they minister to the status quo, innocent of any inspiration. Even revivalists prefer to be guided, not by God, but by careful market research.

We have lost our historic mission. The melting pot is cold. The frontier is closed. Our government is no longer a precarious, exciting experiment. Our nation is one, but divided. No destiny is manifest. True, the business of America may still be business, but many plain people have become bored and resentful at being forced to pursue ever-increasing consumption; many understand that growth for the sake of growth carries with it an eventual doom of depletion and environmental destruction. Our naïve admiration of ourselves as the noble defenders of free-world values has been shattered by Vietnam. And as for prophetic vision, our augurs — the futurologists — offer a surfeit of scenarios, replete with predictions and extrapolations, but with few purposes aside from that of more of the same. In short, we share a common life mainly as the spectators of sports. Our dominant mood is one of drift.

This feeling that our common life has no significant purpose makes the rich, the poor, the middling all inclined to find cause for brute resentment in the public difficulties they inevitably encounter.

Everyone's experience of the community, no matter how fortunate one may be, has some negative features. When people share a strong common purpose, they bear with these difficulties for the sake of the common goal. But when they feel that the community lacks a *raison d'être* in which they can participate personally, its negative features become experienced as meaningless infringements on their personal pursuit of happiness, or, worse yet, as malevolent exploitations of themselves by awesome others. Many, I think, are coming to frame for themselves — some articulately, others tacitly — the dilemma that Rousseau perceived while living under the *ancien régime*: one cannot educate himself to be both a good man and a good citizen. Perhaps, as in the *ancien régime*, we have reached the point of no return in our collapse of civic purpose, but we can only put it to a test by believing that we have not and by trying to end our drift.

If we drift further into a mood of degradation, it will matter little whether our formal education consists in a system of compulsory schooling or one of voluntary study. Neither will be salutary. But whether we continue to drift or not may possibly be determined by what we do with respect to formal education. Were we to choose to create a system of universal voluntary study, we would be embarking on an undertaking of such magnitude that we would be choosing to end the drift; we would be re-creating a common purpose in our community, giving a cultural incarnation to the ideal of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We would be recognizing in deed, not merely word, that self-formation is the lifelong concern of every person.

Recall the words of John Adams: "I must study politics and war that my sons may have the liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce, agriculture in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, porcelain." In this view, our communal mission in point of time was first politics and self-defense; then it became commerce and economic development; and finally it should become cultural achievement.

Compulsory schooling was a didactic expedient suited to a people in the throes of economic development. Universal voluntary study is the educational program proper for a people who would seek to perfect their cultural accomplishments. In choosing to replace an outworn system that is doomed to malfunction with comprehensive opportunities for personal study, we might manage to reunite ourselves in a common endeavor — the creation of a cultural democracy.

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*Professor McClintock is on the staff of Teachers College, Columbia University, and is the author of the recently published* Man and His Circumstances: Ortega as Educator.