

# The Anti-Culture Born of Despair

## *The Face of Youth*

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SEGREGATION is the fundamental principle governing education in this country. Segregation is by parental background and income, governing choice of school. Segregation is by the kind of intelligence measured by the 11 plus. Worst of all, perhaps, is segregation into separate streams at the early age of eight according to expected results in the 11 plus.

Far from ironing out or correcting the class differences of our society, the educational system mirrors and even enhances them. The norms are still set by the private undemocratized sector. The result is the self-perpetuation of a socio-culturally dominant class. Culture continues to be a caste mark, and so to be thought the culture of a class.

The philosophy of the bi-partisan though basically conservative and anti-egalitarian 1944 Education Act has done little to remedy this situation. It rests on the far from progressive myth of opportunity. While allowing the wealthy to continue giving their children a full secondary education as they had done before, it sorts the children of the working class into categories. There are those who are essentially and innately unfit for academic work because of lack of intelli-

gence. These are to be relegated to Secondary Modern schools, there to be "adapted" to life, presumably so as to suit the needs of their future employers. And there are those who are fit for, and could benefit by further education. These are to be given the key opportunity of going to Grammar schools. (Whether selection is to be carried out by the 11 plus or some more accurate method of precasting, potential performance makes little difference. The outcry against the 11 plus therefore misses the mark. For the underlying premise that among those who cannot afford it there are those who are fit and those who are not fit remains the same.)

Far from reducing class differentials in education, the 1944 Act has succeeded only in composing a new pattern of class tensions upon the existing ones. Whereas the socio-cultural barrier used to lie, roughly, between the privately educated upper and middle class, and the state educated lower middle and working class, the 1944 Act has divided the state educated amongst themselves. The intellectual cream has been taken off to grammar school, leaving the rest in a skimmed atmosphere. The universities have been enabled by state scholarships to co-opt a still smaller minority to the socio-economic

class of university graduates. Readers are presumably familiar with some of the results: The split heart of the Scholarship Boy.

We complain of the lack of a National Theatre, of the paltriness of Arts Council grants, of the ravages of commercialism in art. We deplore much of the content of the mass media. Yet we have no answer to the justification offered that it is what the people want, save to say that the people could be made to want something better. We live in a society that lets culture be the appanage of the minority. Art, poetry, philosophy are by and for the few. Few have had the education to appreciate the finest things in our cultural heritage and these things are resented and rejected by those who have not. Few amongst the best educated really desire to share their culture, because an appreciation of the finest things has come to be a caste mark whose significance would be lost if it were more widely shared. Our culture itself suffers from this. Much of our present day music, our painting, our poetry, our philosophy, has the obscurity, the sophistication or the second order character of a set of messages couched in the code of a cultural elite. It is not meant for mankind. Much of the best in broadcasting is not put over the Home or the Light, it comes over the Third and is introduced by the monotone of the don. It is addressed to Oxbridge in diaspora. It has been argued recently that what I have called culture is in fact a class culture, and that the great failing of our education system is that it tries to transmit upper class culture to working class children. I do not think that there is any alternative to Bach, El Greco, and Shakespeare worth transmitting. I cannot agree with a secondary modern child who preferred the washboard to the harp. Rock and roll may be a substitute for country dancing but not for ballet. I believe there is one human cultural heritage which is only accidentally the appanage of a class. And I believe that the process of getting the education to partake of it must needs be costly and long.

### **Mozart off a short pier**

I once asked a set of fourteen-year-olds in a secondary modern school to write about the kind of music they disliked. I told them to give reasons, but refused to give them any further guidance. They wrote against everything they had been taught by their music master. They wrote about Mozart and Beethoven and Schubert. Fourteen out of 32 singled out as object of their special hatred opera. Some gave aesthetic reasons. Classical music was "slow," "went on for hours," had "no go" in it, was full of high notes, had no melody, or rhythm. Others gave reason that gave telling indication of what they expected of art. You could not "clap your hands" to it, "jive to it" or even "hand jive to it." It had no beat. It did not "send you." Then came sociological reasons. Classical music was hated because those who liked it were "old fogies" or "squares." Those who went to operas "talked posho" or were "queers." Brahms was an "old fogy," Beethoven a "downright square."! "Symphonies gave one headaches." "Opera singers should be done in," "Opera banned." Two children thought Covent Garden and Sadler's Wells ought to be bombed. "Violin players must hate cats because they make them go up the wall." "Beethoven and all his followers are just lucky they are not living today. He would have been chivved up by some cool cats." "Mozart ought to take a long run off a short pier." It is easy to laugh at such answers. It is not so easy to laugh at their violence. They were meant, and written with great diligence. The entire class rose to the occasion. The answers point to something more seriously wrong than the teaching of music in secondary modern schools.

We are the "squares" and we are hated for not "getting in the groove" with them, for failing to "get the message" from Elvis Presley. And the cultural and artistic heritage that we seek to impart is rejected for what we get from it and they cannot. We are hated for "getting in the groove" with Bach and Bach is hated because we get *our* message from him. I explored the subject further by getting classes to write about "squares," and to tell me the difference between a "posh" person and a "square." Time and time again I got the same circle of reasons. Classical music was disliked because it was liked by a certain class of people which class of people was disliked because they liked classical music. The "square" was seldom differentiated from the "posh" person save that the latter had the additional attributes of talking "posho" or "nice", being "rich" and "lah de da." This showed the degree to which even secondary modern children are conscious of the correlation between education that makes one a "square" and socio-economic status that makes one "posh." From all this two things emerge and the two are to my mind intimately interrelated. On the one hand a violent dislike for a culture felt to be a class culture and on the other hand a pressing need to "get sent," taking the form of a cult of "rock 'n' roll." Almost every paper I collected was literally strewn with the hallowed names of Elvis Presley, and Tommy Steele, almost invariably in block capitals, and how these artists "sent" them.

The culture represented by the music of Bach and of Mozart is not disliked simply because it "belongs" to some remote set of people who attend the Edinburgh Festival and spend money on classical records. The "square" is not necessarily hated for being "posh." Nor is his culture hated solely because it belongs to the rich. Indeed, the rare "posh" person who is not a "square" is in a perverse way looked up to and admired: to wit, the Duke of Edinburgh. The "square" is hated above all for not sharing the secondary modern child's need to "get sent." The standard definition of the square was a person who either disliked "rock and roll" or liked to listen to classical music and read books. But the auxiliary definitions I got were in many cases far more revealing. Thus a "square" was "old-fashioned," "conceited," "a bore," and more significantly still, "a person who does not approve what you do" and a person "who lets you down." The "square" is essentially out of touch with what the children feel to be their needs. And the culture that he represents is hated because it cannot be participated in, and corresponds to no inner need. "You cannot jive to it," and jiving is a way of "getting sent," "you *cannot even* clap your hands to it." It is completely un-functional. And this provides a rationale for their dislike. Anti-culture is with the majority of secondary modern children I have questioned a complete and closed system. It is a set of strong emotional attitudes about culture completed by a set of justifications. The culture teachers are attempting to impart is both something "old fogies get stuck up about" and something that could not possibly "send" anyone. It is meaningless pretence. Needless to say secondary modern children are mistaken. "Squares" too need to "get sent." For "squares" are human too. I firmly believe that so long as society is at all imperfect escapism is a basic human right. The question is whether or not escapism should take so destructive a form.

### **The vacuum third**

I have tried above to give some account of the philosophy of what teachers have variously described to me as "teen-age nihilism" or the "vacuum mind." I have taken as a starting point what they think of music but I believe it to be pretty obvious that the same attitudes extend to most of the subjects

taught in secondary modern schools. Formal education beyond bare literacy to read comic strips has to them no use, corresponds to no inner need. Secondary modern staff and pupils frequently share the same despair, a sense of the uselessness of attempting to teach on the one hand, and on the other a sense of the uselessness of school. This leads to uncontrollable classes and nervous breakdowns amongst the staff. Many are the classrooms in which teachers and pupils feel alike imprisoned.

I remember how when I was at a posh little prep school my erstwhile friends and I used to provoke those less privileged than ourselves, whom we used to term "gutter-snipes" and "street urchins," to battle with us on our way home from school. We had no common language. It was inconceivable to us that we should play with them. I remember quite vividly how at my public school we used to complain of having to row against grammar schools. We felt grammar schools to be upstarts and parvenues. That grammar schools should dream of taking up rowing was a challenge to be resisted at all costs. Sometimes they would beat us. We were easily consoled for, after all, "they were not gentlemen." During my five years at a public school I do not once recall having to do with anyone who did not go to a private or at any rate a grammar school. Seventy-five per cent of our contemporaries and fellow citizens were regarded as humanly beyond the pale. We were not taught snobbery; we were brought up in a tradition. And those of us who sided with Labour in political arguments incurred wrath not because Labour policies were a menace to our fathers' incomes but because they were quite literally class traitors. I cite my own example because I do not consider it all untypical. Research should, of course, be carried out into class attitudes amongst "ruling class" children. To this there are obvious obstacles on the part of private school authorities. For to ask children questions about class attitudes is to raise questions about something taken for granted.

## **The questionnaire**

Taking a look at the other side of the social picture, we questionnaired a number of secondary modern children on what they thought respectively of grammar school and public school children. The question about grammar school children generated the most violent answers. They were characterized as "snobs," "big heads," people who "went around as though they owned the place," and as thinking "they had all the brains and no-one else had." Some put "rats" and "scum." The question about public schools was as often as not misunderstood. Public schools seemed to be taken to mean state schools. Some put "alright," others "easy to get on with," or "nice kids." Where the difference was explained most people put "don't know any," a few put "snobs." A thirteen-year-old remarked "pity they are snobs for they are at the best schools." The attitudes towards grammar school children of those in non-grammar streams of comprehensive schools were far more moderate. These ranged from "brainy" through "a little stuck up" to "lucky." Those in grammar streams of comprehensive schools were as was to be expected a little more conscious of what was meant by public schools, and almost always put "snobs" regardless of the fact they did not know any. Daily contact between grammar and non-grammar streams in comprehensive schools may help lessen the bitterness born of 11 plus. It is to this extent a partial solution. But the answers we got to a further question "What do you think of those of your own age already at work?" shows how much of a problem still remains. Whereas fourteen and fifteen-year-olds in non-grammar schools tended to express envy, those in

grammar streams tended to express sympathetic condescension. The former said "lucky," "they've got the money"; the latter said "nice but ignorant," "silly not to stay on" (as though it was up to them!), "they are unlucky," and even "good luck to them."

The questionnaire used to obtain some of the information here contained a number of questions intended to ascertain class differentials in expectations and attitudes. Children were asked a number of multiple choice questions about how they got on with parents, how they got on with teachers, how much spare time they spent at home and whether they found life at school worthwhile, which they had to answer in terms of five possibilities. They were also asked a number of open-ended questions such as "What do you most look forward to in the next few years?", "What do you think you will be doing at the age of 30?" and "What, if different, would you like to be doing at the age of 30?"

These were followed by "Do you think you will get sufficient education to do what you would really like to do in life?" and "If not, why not? Who do you think to blame?"

We have as yet obtained only 70 answers, with one exception confined to fourteen and fifteen-year-olds at comprehensive schools (including grammar streams) and secondary modern schools. So it is too early to draw any but the most tentative conclusions. We hope in the none-too-distant future to obtain a sufficiently large random sample from all classes to form a somewhat better picture.

A preliminary glance at results so far received shows a surprising difference between the attitudes and expectations of, on the one hand, secondary modern and non-grammar stream children in comprehensive schools, and grammar stream children on the other. The former rarely if ever find school more than fairly worthwhile. They look forward above all to making money and leaving school. They have a nebulous idea, if any, of what they will be doing at the age of 30. They seem to have a very limited time perspective and in answer to "What gives you most satisfaction in day-to-day life?" tend to put "girls" or even "sex."

They tend to get on "very well" with their parents, but tend to spend "little" to "as little as possible" of their spare time at home. They seldom think they will not have sufficient education to do what they would really like to do. Grammar stream children tend to have a more realistic picture of what they will be doing at 30. As often as not they find life at school "very" worthwhile. "What do you dread most in life?" sometimes gets the answer "G.C.E." They tend as is only to be expected to spend a little more time at home, and frequently put "a good day's work" or "doing a job well and getting praised for it" for the question about what gives them most satisfaction in their day-to-day life. The impression one gets is that the "grammar stream" child is if anything more ambitious than his contemporary in the non-grammar stream, and that he lives his life in a more extended time perspective.

## **A complete human life**

More general questions such as "What do you think bad, wrong or unjust about England and the English way of life?" and "Do you think there is anything you could help do about it?" showed up little difference between grammar stream and non-grammar stream children. Answers to the former question were sometimes "irrelevant" but revealing, as for instance, "The old pro's of Piccadilly," "the Niggers and the Jews," though there were occasional glimpses of acute social consciousness, "one law for the rich and one for the poor," "slums" or "the schools." The answer to the latter question "Do you think there is anything you could help do about it?"

was inevitably "no." This is where the old class difference between the state educated and the privately educated is very significant. Though we have not had any yet, I am sure we shall get relatively more affirmative answers from those at public schools. When I was fifteen two boys out of a class of twenty at my public school wanted to become M.P.s and one a minister, though, of course, public school boys have less immediate and personal reasons for finding things wrong with English society. Working class children's answers seem to point to a certain apathy. Of the seventy answers we have had sixty-five intended to vote Labour, three Communist and two Conservative, but only ten thought they could do something about what was wrong, the majority did not bother to answer, some twenty put "no." Those who answered "yes" frequently advocated violence, as one who thought "the yids" the bad thing about England and advocated throwing them out, or else gave stupid answers such as "put me in charge." None saw the answer in terms of political action via the Labour Party. In answer to the somewhat vague question, "Are you happy in life," the vast majority answered "very." Of course those so far questioned were all very young.

What right have we to speak of the despair of those considered "unfit" for proper secondary education? In a narrowly empirical sense none at all. Secondary modern children are happy for they will soon be at work. And if they hate Shakespeare and love "rock and roll" let them—*de gustibus non est disputandum*, so long as their gangs do not harm our property. It seems as though we were using despair in a Kierkegaardian sense; we are all in despair whether we feel it or not, for in the face of God we are all sinners. But this is not so. There is something metaphysical in the concept of despair I have been presupposing here, yet it can be measured. It can be measured not by straightforward nose-counting of those who will say yes to "Are you in despair?", but by counting the number of those showing certain symptoms. I have tried in this article to sketch certain symptoms. Anti-culture in secondary modern schools, and the accompanying focus on short-run economic and sexual achievement is but one of these. But the disease is a psycho-social one affecting all classes and age groups, and the ivory towerism of the Third Programme or of the back pages of the *New Statesman* are further symptoms. The disease is dangerously self-perpetuating. Acceptance of the

philosophy of the 1944 Act, acceptance of the theory that proper secondary education should be reserved to a minority selected by parental income and/or 11 plus, is today producing a generation made unfit for proper secondary education, and who are unlikely to demand it for their children. Proper secondary education I believe to be a pre-condition of participation in a fully human life, and as such a human right. Until a far greater number have had it it will not be demanded as a human right, and will remain the privilege of a social class extended to the lucky few. And it will not be in the interests of the minority of the decently educated to seek the universalization of something that is now their privilege. Such are the mechanics of cultural alienation as operated by our educational system today. Millions are spent daily in state schools forming children made unfit, human beings who feel that proper education and the culture that is a significant part of its content is not for them. Children are made not to care for what society owes them. This need not be so, but it is unlikely that the next Labour government will succeed in breaking this vicious circle. For the majority of its supporters were forced to work in their early teens, its M.P.s, its thinkers and its leaders belong willy-nilly to those who can afford the best schools. And the trade union chiefs do not care except in so far as raising school leaving age affects the market for labour.

The despair that plagues our society is despair about the possibility of a complete human life for all. It affects intellectual and secondary modern child alike. The former have to offer what the latter is being formed to refuse. Those who have seen cultural alienation in operation at close range in our secondary modern schools, those who have tried to teach there and failed to accept the dirty white lie about there being the fit and the unfit, those know they have plenty in common with the children. At the end of the long day's boredom and strain both terribly need to "get sent." Both could share something else: the culture that might be transmitted. But that is reserved for other schools and another type of child. A human life for some is not a fully human life for anyone. The violent teddy boy, the pathologically shy northern chemist, and the blase public school boy, each in his way a victim, are all symptoms of the same disease. They will not speak to each other for they cannot.