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From Universalism to Usurpation: An Essay on the Antecedents to Compulsory School Attendance Legislation

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Compulsory education is receiving increasing attention in policy making, educational, and scholarly circles. The Yoder case, which established the right of the Amish in Wisconsin not to send their children to school beyond the eighth grade, tested compulsion in the policy arena via the free exercise clause of the First Amendment. In finding for Yoder, however, the court majority noted more than three centuries of self-sufficiency and adherence to the principles of law and order by the Amish, and cautioned that the court's decision should not be construed as opening the door to a flood of petitions against compulsory education *per se*. This action by the Supreme Court appeared to discourage questioning the propriety of compulsion itself, especially by groups, as Justice Burger put it, "claiming to have recently discovered some progressive or more enlightened process for rearing children in modern life."

Yet the dimensions of compulsory education itself are not the direct provision of the Supreme Court, as education in general is under state rather than federal jurisdiction. Here too, compulsion is receiving wider publicity. Recently, a Florida judge ruled that the father of five young children was not required to send

Suggestions on earlier drafts made by Charles Burgess, C. H. Edson, David Tyack, and Michael Zuckerman are gratefully acknowledged. I alone, however, remain responsible for the contents of the present version.

his children to school because, in his opinion, the Florida compulsory attendance laws impinged upon individual rights guaranteed by the Constitution. Additionally, some states, California, Oregon, and Washington among them, have instituted proficiency tests as indices of educational achievement, thereby deemphasizing to a small degree the imperatives of attendance.

Although the courts and state legislative bodies may be deliberating policy implications of compulsory education statutes, educators too are displaying increased interest in compulsion. *Phi Delta Kappan*, a magazine found in the offices of many school principals, recently published a series of articles on compulsory attendance (Johnson, 1973). A 1972 Gallup poll indicated that 38 percent of the professional educators polled believe that students uninterested in attending secondary schools should not be forced to attend. The National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education (1973) issued a report in which a section was included questioning the advisability of some facets of compulsory attendance laws. Specifically, the commission recommended that the maximum age at which a child should be compelled to attend school should be reduced to 14. Even the historically "middle of the road" National Education Association appointed a task force on compulsion (National Education Association, 1972) which reported:

There is no question but that all Americans require an education, but as society's needs have come to change so rapidly, there has also come the need for a much wider variety of alternatives for securing the required education; and many of those alternatives will have to be pursued in ways other than those by which most schools presently operate and are organized. (p.2)

Despite this increasing interest in the pragmatic facets of compulsory education, scholars only recently have approached compulsory education in any depth. To the best of my knowledge, only one other major conference (that sponsored by the Institute of Human Studies and the Center for Independent Education and held in Milwaukee in November 1972) has been organized on the subject (Rickenbacker, 1974).¹ Historians of education have only begun to provide much substance on the development of compulsion itself—what led to the existence of the statutes, why they were passed, and with what consequences. In fact, except

¹ The other conference was a symposium entitled "Perspectives on Compulsory School Attendance" held at the meetings of the American Educational Research Association, April 1975, in Washington, D.C. An abbreviated version of this paper was presented at that symposium.

for a few rather hortative works on the subject (Ensign, 1921; Perrin, 1896), historical perspectives on the subject have been nonexistent until the last few years. Contemporary revisionist historians have talked around compulsion, but few have examined it frontally. Since the interest in compulsory education seems to be growing on many fronts, it is essential that we gain a firm understanding of the origin and growth of those laws now being called into question.²

Purpose and Scope

To better understand the origins of compulsory attendance laws, this paper presents a historical overview of the precursors to compulsory school attendance. The essay is based largely upon secondary sources that directly or marginally discuss compulsory attendance, and consequently the focus is one of review and synthesis rather than one of original interpretation.

There is a paucity of research on the passage and implementation of compulsory attendance laws themselves, and since I will not examine primary source material with regard to the laws, I have chosen to concentrate upon what may be termed the "antecedents" to the passage and enforcement of the laws. By antecedents, I refer to the conditions that seemed influential in the ultimate passage and enforcement of compulsory attendance laws. This focus, then, only marginally concerns the political dynamics of passage itself and does not treat in detail the consequences of compulsory attendance laws for various elements of society.

To examine the relevant antecedents to compulsory attendance laws, I will focus first upon the inchoate stages of schooling within the Republic, for compulsory attendance laws need to be understood within that context. Next, I will turn to the Common School movement during the early and middle nineteenth century and show how the dominance of the Common School led to an overall restriction of educational choice for the majority of those in the society, a factor that was a crucial antecedent to the passage of compulsory attendance laws. Finally, I will consider

²The terms *compulsory education*, *compulsory schooling*, and *compulsory school attendance* often are used synonymously. They should not be so used. Compulsory education envelops a much larger issue, namely, that certain skills and/or behaviors are required to be learned by all people of a society. Compulsory schooling connotes that the person must go to school to learn those skills. Compulsory school attendance means that the person must attend the school x days a year for y years to learn the required skills. In this paper, I will use the term *compulsory attendance*, in that eventual legislation on compulsion seemed to refer most specifically to the attendance of children in schools for some specified period of time.

the events surrounding the actual passage and enforcement of the laws themselves, maintaining that the laws were more important for their latent rather than manifest purposes, and that they provided a symbolic focus upon a number of disparate but related concerns, most of which were only marginally related to schooling itself. In tracing the slow, twisted, but almost inexorable movement toward compulsory attendance, I conclude that while the population of the country was becoming more diverse and pluralistic, the schools of the nation evolved increasingly towards monolithism and constraint—a situation that still today restricts the school's ability to meet a diversity of needs.

Before Compulsion-Universalism

The growth and transformation of organized American education is the story of change from an informal, loosely structured, discontinuous educational process to a school *system* that was both formal and explicit, increasingly centralized, and based upon greater continuity and flow from one unit to the next. This progression in education can be accounted for partially by the subtle alteration in which the society perpetuated itself and by which its culture was transmitted. In the earliest days of the colonies, culture was transmitted primarily by family, church, and community, and other institutional forms for the transmission of culture were infrequent and dichotomous. Schools arose to assume a greater burden in the enculturation of the young as the modal form of cultural transmission shifted to new and secondary institutional arrangements.

Bailyn (1960) has pointed to the geographical mobility of the family as a factor leading not only to the diminishing importance of community and church in the formal education of the young, but to a rise in the impact of the school. Indeed, according to Bailyn, by the middle of the seventeenth century there was a vague but collective realization that the family could not continue to be the main impetus for formal education. Families had become more mobile, more dispersed, and increasingly unable to teach a formal curriculum. Bailyn's postulate concerning the instability and mobility of the family in early colonial America is not a thesis uniformly held (Greven, 1970; Lockridge, 1970), yet there seems little doubt that, at least by the middle of the eighteenth century, the mobility and consequent relative instability of the family severely affected the enduring and binding interrelationships between family, community, and formal education. But the evolution of schools as the prime agency of a formalized cultural transmission process was long in coming and sporadic in nature, and education, insofar as it was persistent, formal, and

took place within the context of the school, was, until the middle of the eighteenth century “definitely a sometime thing” (Demos, 1970).

This infrequency of education through schooling existed despite the fact that the first compulsory training and literacy laws were enacted in 1642 and 1648, and the first compulsory schooling law in 1647.³ But although these laws existed, they resulted in little change in the schooling process. The laws symbolized the Puritan’s faith in formal education via schooling to absorb the perceived slack from the family and community, but the imperatives of the time were too demanding to transform the symbolism into practice. As communities dispersed, as families became more discontinuous, the edicts of survival and sensibility continually overshadowed movements toward schooling, and the seventeenth century was characterized by a commitment to formal schooling but an inability to implement it effectively.

Despite the soft impact of *schools*, devotion to *education* was strong and self-evident, and there were a variety of contexts within which Americans were educated during the pre-nineteenth century. Not only had schools begun to proliferate and become more widespread, but other educative avenues were opening. A greater variety of printed material was available to a greater number of people as publishing became more common and refined. Voluntary associations such as Masons, merchant’s organizations, neighborhood groups, and young people’s groups were formed throughout settled areas, providing arenas for debate and the exchange of ideas. Finally, as Cremin (1970) has discussed, there was much intercolonial and interprovincial communication, thus education. With this communication and the attendant trade, travel, and exposure to new experiences came varied opportunities for learning for both young and old.

Commitment to the learning of basic skills that later would be taught in schools was most dramatically operationalized by the degree of the literacy present in colonial America. Cremin (1970) has pointed out that “inert” literacy—that requiring minimal technical competency—for adult males in the mid-eighteenth century ranged from 70 to 100%. Estimates of “inert” literacy for a similar period in England are 50 to 70% of the adult male population. Such literacy, evidenced by signatures on public documents or through correspondence, signifies that the skill most probably was acquired in the household, church, or during the course of employment, but not in the schools. When literacy is

³ Proponents of compulsory school attendance sometimes cite this law as a traditional defense of compulsory school attendance, but such clearly was not the case, as this law required schooling but not compulsory school attendance.

defined in terms of a "liberating" literacy, or that wherein the individual expanded both his competence and motivation to be increasingly literate, literacy rates were at least as high in the colonies as they were in England. But the chances were that such a liberating literacy was developed increasingly in schools rather than via more informal means. These figures reflect that the effects of schooling by the mid-eighteenth century were strong.⁴

Yet commitment to learning seems to have been translated into learning in schools for sizable portions of the society by the late eighteenth century. Fishlow (1966a) has indicated that an alleged decline in schooling and literacy between 1790 and 1840 is not supported by the evidence, and that in fact enrollment rates in schools increased throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The extent to which formal schooling affected the masses on a national level prior to 1840 is not reliably known, but selected regional statistics are impressive. For example, in New York state in 1821, of the estimated 380,000 children aged five to sixteen, 342,000 were said to be in school (West, 1967). Examining the enrollment in schools in terms of white population aged five to nineteen, Fishlow found that attendance ratios in the New England States in 1830 ranged from a low of 52% to a high of 84%. By 1840, the rates in the same geographical area had increased to a high of 88%. These figures refer to the heavily populated states of the nation at that time, yet even in the less populated states such as Ohio, 20% of the white population aged five to nineteen was enrolled in schools in 1830, a rate which nearly doubled by 1840. The general increased enrollment rate for children in the five to fifteen age bracket in Massachusetts for this period of time is supported by Vinovskis (1972).

Kaestle's (1972) study of the Dutch schools of New York City in the late eighteenth century presents an interesting illumination on the *meaning* of enrollment figures. Enrollment in the predominantly private and informal schools of the time was about 52% of the school-aged population in the ages of five to fifteen. But the 52% figure should not be construed to mean that 48% did not

⁴ Although Cremin's statements show a people dedicated to the basics of a formal education, it would be an oversimplification to assume equal access to formal education. Indeed, Lockridge (1974) disputes many of these figures on literacy. Nevertheless, the level of education in the eighteenth century varied by both class and occupation (Main, 1965). Slaves and many servants largely were illiterate, and poorer farmers in the back country possessed only inert literacy. Hence, it is probably only for those above the lower class that the term liberating literacy applies, and the size of the lower class in eighteenth century America is a subject still undergoing considerable debate (Main, 1965; Nash, 1970; Kulikoff, 1971).

attend school. Rather, it means that 48% did not attend school during any one cross-sectional period of time. The modal activity of the era was to send children to school for the length of time deemed necessary to learn what parents felt needed to be learned. Consequently, a child might attend school early in his life and not return, or he might enter later for a specified period, or he might even be in and out as the need arose. Such flexibility, considered utopian by many modern educational thinkers, was quite common in the late eighteenth century.

In looking at education and schooling through the end of the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth century, we can say that education was a highly valued process, a fact illustrated by the remarkably high degree of literacy demonstrated by colonial Americans. Most people, save slaves and the poor, seemed able to learn basic skills such as reading without the benefit of formal schooling. As learning of such skills shifted away from the community and the family, schools arose with increased frequency to continue and augment the formal education of children. Schooling evolved to become a universal aspect in the lives of the majority of children by the early part of the nineteenth century. Not schooling as we know it today—continuous from ages six to sixteen—but schooling in amounts sufficient to transmit certain skills and beliefs. This strong presence of almost universal schooling is important to note, for, as we shall discuss later, it existed before attendance at a school became mandatory.

From Universalism to Uniformity

Schools of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were largely private and informal, but the public sector came to control more of the schooling process through the remainder of the nineteenth century. Private or public, schools were not free except for the very poor. Largely private and somewhat autonomous “fee” schools of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century probably were much like the New York Public School Society, characterized as “resting on faith in the individual talented amateur and, (which) at an overall administrative level, scorned the need for elaborate organization, state control, or professional staff” (Katz, 1971, p.9). School policies and practices were not standardized, and education within them operated on the basis of local interests; in many respects, schools were islands unto themselves.

The state’s share of responsibility for the founding and support of schools was relatively minimal throughout the earliest years of the national period. Kraushaar (1972) terms the state’s role as

one of "subsidiarity," signifying that the state generally became involved in either the founding or support of a school only when voluntary efforts proved unsuccessful. Since the state maintained a low profile, schooling itself was connected closely to the hegemony of the church. Accordingly, schooling in the early part of the nineteenth century tended to be associated in part with denominationalism and was an active part of evangelical revivalism (Matthews, 1969). The tie between schooling and religion was the church, whose role it was not only to educate but to proselytize, a function which continued even after the rise of the common school (Michaelson, 1970; Tyack, 1966).

The transition from such a disjointed, private, and relatively unstructured institutional arrangement to one that became increasingly homogenous, if not in content then certainly in form, began quite early and before that era known as the common school revival. The seeds of the uniform common school were present before the nineteenth century, and lay dormant during times of more pressing political problems. After the Revolution, however, the sprouts of what would thereafter become the state public school system appeared.

The advent of this system from a relative patchwork of disparate entities is seen in Kaestle's (1972, 1973) examination of the New York City system noted earlier. These late eighteenth and early nineteenth century entities, although not "free" were "common" in that they served children from families with a wide range of incomes and from various occupations, charging fees that most parents were able to afford. In 1795 the state legislature, prompted by common school advocates from upstate, passed a law making counties eligible for matching funds for public schools. However, the teachers of the common pay schools were unable to convince the New York City Common Council (which was to administer the funds received from the state) that the pay schools themselves were indeed "public" schools and thus eligible to receive the funds. Kaestle does not define what the council meant by the term "public," but a distinction was made between teachers hired by the inhabitants of a geographical area and the teachers competing for clients on the open market. The latter came to be associated with what we now term private schools, whereas the former, apparently involving a political contract, became part of a "public" system. Interestingly enough, it may well have been that the simple issues of how to devise a system for the allocation of funds, as evinced in the New York situation, became a catalyst of our public school system today.

That other financial considerations may have played an important role in the definition and rise of a common public school supported by state funds is made clear by Fishlow (1966b), who

ties an increase in the rate of public school enrollment in the Central states to the period of settlement in the region and economic abundance. He demonstrates that public education did not predominate until the lesser degrees of mobility, together with the permanent character of the population, helped in the creation of an economic surplus, which then could be applied to the previously mentioned long-standing values of the population for schooling. Certainly fiscal considerations, associated with relevant demographic characteristics, such as population stability and concentration, would appear to be crucial factors contributing to the growth in schooling.

Fishlow (1966a) is among those who argue that the educational revival of the 1830's and 1840's was a change in the type of education rather than its quality or quantity. Indeed, the almost fortuitous role of the financing of schooling (perhaps more than the efforts of reformers) vaulted the public school into the forefront. The increased competition for clients caused by the presence of state subsidized schools, denominational institutions, private academies, and a host of other privately financed schools began to have its effect. The state maintained an advantage because of its control of more predictable sources of resources as the nineteenth century wore on, and as taxation increasingly brought funds to the state-supported common schools and diverted monies away from those privately financed, the influence of the non-state-supported schools began to wane.

There are a number of reasons why the common school eventually triumphed as *the* school system. I have already alluded to the important role of finance in the elimination of competition, and it may have been that these financial considerations, once institutionalized, increasingly became important factors in the rise of the common school (Greene, 1965). However, there are other more ideological interpretations based upon critical events or phases within historical time.

One view, espoused largely by Messerli (1965) and Cremin (1951), places the rise of the common school as a pragmatic effort on the part of reformers and enlightened legislators to meet what were seen as serious shortcomings in the schools in light of rapidly changing social conditions. As immigration in large numbers began, as industrialization grew to dominate, and as the nation was ruptured from its perceived bucolic and somewhat orderly past, thoughtful men became increasingly convinced, as had Jefferson, Webster, and Rush before them, that a loosely structured, informal, disconnected pattern of education would never serve to reinforce the structure of the Republic (Rudolph, 1965). Accordingly, the purpose of the common school, as seen by those such as Mann and Barnard and their allies in state

legislatures, was not just to provide a good education to all children—an investment which would serve society in the long run—but also to reinforce and even build a common system of values which then would serve as the common bedrock of the American national ideology.

Connected with this more pragmatic notion of reform is that of the common school as moral reform, wherein the common school movement is visualized as a development toward defining *the* American character based upon the ideals of the dominant Protestant middle class (Bidwell, 1966; Elson, 1964; Greenbaum, 1974; Katz, 1968). This emerging middle class sought to affirm a pattern of life that appeared threatened by continued immigration and the concentration of laborers in urban areas, and the schools increasingly became politicized to reflect the moral world of the middle-class old-stock American citizen. The world of the early nineteenth century was a moral world, and there was little room for neutrality. Indeed, as Rollins (1976) shows, even lexicography was a moral process, reflecting the “manipulation of language as a means of influencing opinion and behavior” (p. 424). Men succeeded not just because they were intelligent or energetic, but because they possessed good character; conversely, men failed because they lacked virtue, and poverty or hunger were just and proper punishments for the unworthy. The mission of the school then became to instill virtue as defined by those who were most vocal in their support of the common school.

There is also reason to believe that the ascendancy of the common school was a manifestation of political maneuvering between political and economic factions. Hence the common school movement culminated in an alliance of various groups who were able to realize, in various degrees, their own self-interest within a society, parts of which may or may not have had similar concerns (Veysey, 1969). Yet the ascendancy of groups supporting the common schools did not occur without considerable conflict. Katz (1971), for example, notes that “incipient bureaucracy,” which was to emerge as the dominant organizational structure of public schooling, was in competition with at least three other models in the early nineteenth century. Additionally, Ravitch (1974) documents the political battles between the Public School Society and Catholics over control of educational funds in New York City in the 1830's and 1840's.

Even when public school reforms did emerge, the motives of those advocating the reforms can be questioned. Katz (1968) suggests that reform in mid-nineteenth century Massachusetts was not the result of concerned humanitarianism or identification with the underprivileged. More likely, the existence of high schools and reform schools was symbolic of attempts by the

traditionally dominant to reassert their leadership positions, under attack by "new stock" urban business interests (Donald, 1956). Threatened by a growing and increasingly urban nation, which they found distasteful and could not understand, the old leadership turned to the common school and the abolition movements as ways to reexert social dominance. The common school was, in Katz's (1968) terms, "spearheaded by the socially and intellectually prominent concerned for the preservation of domestic tranquility and an ordered, cohesive society . . . this group has been supported by middle class parents anxious about the status of their children . . ." (p. 213).

Finally, West's (1967) interpretation of the rise of the common school rests on a model of a political economy, stating simply that the costs of political influence are borne by those most likely to benefit from legislation. West quite convincingly discusses the free school movement in New York and its origins with teachers' institutes in the 1840's. The basis of institute support lay in the difficulty member teachers often experienced in collecting bills for their services; the proposed free school would eliminate the need to collect rate bills, thereby providing a more dependable source of income. West suggests that the teachers, rather than settling for administrative reform of the private fee schools, envisioned the creation of the state free school as a means to eliminate competition provided by fee schools, especially possible if the fiscal support of free schools was made mandatory. The benefactor of such legislation, according to the teachers' institutes, was the common man who supposedly could not afford to send his children to school if the state did not provide free services. Yet, as I have noted before, benevolent rationales often served as smoke screens, covering the power struggles between groups within the larger society.

Free publicly supported schools were part of an American educational *system* everywhere but on the frontier and in isolated rural areas of the South by the middle of the nineteenth century. Rather than this growth being the result of any one factor just reviewed, the interaction of a multitude of factors is evidenced. At the national level, the "right" combination of ingredients interacted during one era and the common school emerged "victorious." The long-standing American devotion to education, born in a country nurtured during the optimism of the Enlightenment; a people beset with questions of nationality and identity who saw education as a vehicle by which to come to grips with who they were; a nation which noticed changes in its economy, settlement patterns, and political structure and which desperately felt the need for a common and unifying experience—all were influential factors. Yet it took alliances of

educators, Protestant ministers, social reformers, businessmen, politicians, and even concerned parents to take this strange mixture of hopes, fears, contradictions, and paradoxes, and meld it into legislative action resulting in the evolution of state-supported school systems.

The eventual triumph of a uniform educational system, funded, governed, and supervised by the state, removed from many families something which they had in their schools up to that time—some element of choice of where their children would go to school. This choice may have been, in Zuckerman's terms (1970) governed "by the canons of community rather than the individualistic canons of contract" (p. 255), but they were choices nonetheless. Soon after the mid-nineteenth century, choices became fewer and more costly, prohibited in part by a tax structure that left few options. Whereas many parents once had the choice of where to send their children to school, soon they only had the option of whether or not to have children attend school and for how long. The common school effectively determined where a child would attend, and its existence as a coordinated, somewhat standardized and pervasive system made schools, for the first time, amenable to uniform decisions of public policy.

From Uniformity to Usurpation

Compulsory school attendance laws followed soon after the public tax-supported school achieved dominance by the middle of the nineteenth century. The majority of legislation on compulsion was passed during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and by 1918 all states had adopted compulsory attendance laws.

Compulsory attendance statutes themselves surfaced late in the nineteenth century, but the foundation of compulsory attendance laws rests in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The rise of the common school established a uniform institutional base controlled and funded by the state. For example, state agencies such as the New York Board of Regents were established in the late eighteenth century in order to supervise and control state schooling. Similarly, Horace Mann in 1837 called for a superintendent in the Boston schools to administer the growing network of schools, and by the 1850's superintendents in urban school systems increasingly became common. Although these early superintendents had little power other than to collect statistics and write reports, they were able to use their office as a beachhead from which they and others could

espouse concern for reform and advocacy of the Prussian centralized school system.

Other bricks in the institutional wall supported the enactment of compulsory attendance laws. Many states had passed truancy laws prior to compulsory attendance laws, and although truancy laws did not force attendance at school as much as they served as legal justifications for reducing vagrancy, they did supply the legal precedent for state regulation of attendance. Perhaps most important as a foundation to compulsory attendance laws was the increasing centralization and bureaucratization of school systems, particularly systems in large urban areas (Katz, 1971; Tyack, 1967). Centralization, the administrative machinery that developed in conjunction with centralization, and standardization all had been evolving piecemeal throughout the nineteenth century, progressing toward eventual systematization (Cutler, 1976).⁵ These factors facilitated the eventual implementation of attendance laws, for they provided a relatively firm, monolithic, and efficiently controlled base upon which the compulsory attendance laws themselves could be superimposed.

The actual introduction of compulsory attendance laws must be understood in the social context from which they arose. First, the nation was in the midst of a long transition from an agrarian to a predominantly industrialized society. Although the country, in its earliest days, had imported much of its technical knowledge and equipment, self-development was more common by the early nineteenth century. This knowledge base, coupled with ready access to virtually unlimited mineral deposits close to major industrial centers, a growing transportation system, and the presence of a plentiful supply of labor all combined to accelerate the pace of industrialization.

Connected with growing industrialization was spatial movement of populations from rural to urban areas. Large industrial plants were located along adequate transportation networks and sources of labor, and these plants continued to draw new individuals in search of employment. Despite what seemed to be universal concern on the part of intellectuals, writers, and reformers for the decay and degeneration of the city, urban areas continued to attract people, both "native stock" from rural areas and especially immigrants from abroad.

The movement of the foreign born into the nation, then, is a third major context into which an examination of compulsory

⁵ Those who have done the most research on the subject, that is Katz and Tyack, differ on when centralization became effective. Katz places the impact of centralization in the mid-nineteenth century, while Tyack sees it occurring in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century.

attendance legislation must be placed. The Northern Europeans—Germans, Scots, Irish, and Scandinavians all arrived in great waves, largely during the early and middle nineteenth century. They were followed by the Southern and Eastern Europeans—Italians, Slavs, Poles, and Russians—who arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Most initially flocked to the cities to accumulate sufficient funds before they dispersed to farmlands and small towns and cities about which they had dreamed for years. These dreams never materialized for many, and rather than accumulate monies to move on, large numbers remained in the ethnic ghettos of New York, Chicago, Cleveland, and other cities.

Industrialization, urbanization, and immigration influenced forceful and dramatic social changes in terms of authority relationships between the individual and the state, extant political structures, modal family patterns, occupational hierarchies, distribution of properties, and, perhaps most significantly, social disorganization. Social disorganization in the form of crime, poverty, revolt, vice, and immorality was viewed by many as tearing the fabric of society. Many in Europe earlier had fled to this country to escape similar conditions, and to view the prevalence of these conditions in the United States terrified many old-stock Americans. Perhaps more important, however, was that most were perplexed as to how to prevent such social chaos. Americans in the past had relied on the mediation of the inner man—his sense of values, community, and moral worth—to combat divisiveness. America traditionally had been a nation of “island communities,” each self-regulative and relatively autonomous. But the advent of urbanization, industrialization, and massive immigration altered the ability of primary agencies of socialization (family and community) as they existed to provide that moral reservoir needed for inner direction. Many agreed with the secretary of the Connecticut Board of Education, B. G. Northrop, who wrote:

It is largely through immigration that the number of ignorant, vagrant, and criminal youth has recently multiplied to an extent truly alarming in some of our cities . . . their depravity is sometimes defiant and their resistance to moral suasion is obstinate.

Wiebe (1967) has pointed out that the transition from island communities to continuous social networks was painful, because urbanization, industrialization, and immigration exacerbated the majority's awareness of certain “undesirable” conditions that most would like to have forgotten—conditions such as poverty, delinquency, foreign customs, unemployment, idleness,

squalor, depravity, and other forms of social disorganization. Such conditions were particularly visible because they were the plight of certain "types" of people who increasingly populated large urban areas. This group consisted of the "underbelly" of society—that strata whom one observer noted "hardly lived like animals," composed of the foreign born or children of the foreign born, the poor, and unskilled laborers, most of whom lived in urban slums. Individuals and families so typed were usually associated with conditions of delinquency, crime, and general disorder, and were viewed as the greatest threats to the existence of the social fabric during the middle and late nineteenth century.

As might be expected, children from families of this background were suspected as least likely to attend school or were most likely to attend it for the shortest period of time. Katz (1972) has demonstrated the direct correlation between school attendance and ethnicity in Hamilton, Ontario. Those of Scottish or Canadian descent were more likely to send their children to school than were those of Irish (Catholic) decent. Although variations did exist at certain age levels, Katz concludes that while each economic, religious, and ethnic group sent proportionally more children to school from 1851 to 1861, the gap between them remained as wide as ever because as Irish Catholics increased their rate of attendance, the attendance of other groups rapidly increased also.

The relationship between the color of the father's collar and the amount of schooling has been illuminated further by Katz (1972) and by Troen (1973) for St. Louis during the late nineteenth century. Troen concludes that even though education was open and free, all did not make equal use of it. Children from professional and managerial families tended to remain in school longer and attend more regularly. Children from working-class families had a median attendance rate of 33%, sons of businessmen had median attendance rates of 65%, and sons of professionals attended school 80% of the time. Father's occupation, then as now, also was related to subsequent life chances. Sons of blue collar fathers usually continued in similar positions after leaving school, and sons of white collar fathers entered a business or profession.

Since children of laborers or the unskilled often were loose in society and in school less frequently, those designated groups soon became the target in a search for cures to the problems of an increasingly urbanized society.⁶ Many feared that these un-

⁶ These groups, while immigrants or the children of immigrants in general, increasingly became more than just immigrants. As the nineteenth century wore

supervised youth would become exposed to the vices of the city. Most problematically, one could rely no longer upon the hallowed and traditional institutions of the society to effectively serve the function of child rearing. Edwin Seaver, Boston's superintendent of schools, lamented the passing of the Arcadian past wherein man was seen at oneness with all:

People have gathered themselves into great and changing cities. The farms are deserted, of gardens there are few, and the neighbors who had workshops for their various crafts are now employed in the great manufacturing establishments.

Something had to be done to prevent the disintegration of the culture, and, as Burgess (1976) has outlined, a new "majoritarian mood" which dominated between the Civil War and World War I was associated with many of these changes. The creation of new "secondary" agencies of socialization in part was a result of this mood, and the school came to assume the banner of childhood socialization. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the school became firmly injected into the relationship between youth socialization and the demands of the larger society as an agency of social regulation. Reformers, politicians, and business leaders had examined disruption and social disorganization in urban centers and saw both closely associated with children of the poor, particularly the poor of the foreign born. To their way of thinking, the structure and values of poor immigrant families was lacking because the families evidenced little concern for their children, a situation that often resulted in offspring who later would become a burden on society; furthermore, reformers often saw little moral concern for the administration of judicious discipline in the homes of many of the poor. If the school was to eradicate this poor influence, it then would have to extend its web of control by assuming the role of the parent—in effect by becoming a surrogate parent (Burgess, 1976; Katz, 1968; Lazer-son, 1971).

To most leaders, the school increasingly became the most expeditious and effective tool to both control and rejuvenate the society. But if the school was to accept the responsibility of a surrogate parent, specialists would be required—professionals in

on into its final fifty years, Southern and Eastern Europeans—Italians, Russians, Poles, Slavs—swelled the ranks of immigrants. These people were "different" from immigrants in general, not only because they were non-Nordic and thus appeared physically distinctive, but also because they were poorer, less literate, concentrated more in urban areas than did Northern European immigrants, and, perhaps most important, were non-Protestant—characteristics that varied greatly from the archetypical American citizen.

child nurture, the treatment of children from "deprived" backgrounds, or the rehabilitation of children already tainted by their contact with society. Such bade for a new set of skills, required of a new breed of individuals whose sole purpose it was to minister unto the young. The growth of these occupational groups, and most specifically the professionalization process that occurred within them, coincides with the increased hegemony that the school and other institutions gained over the lives of children, especially those children perceived to be most in need of their services. Histories describing the professionalization of social work describe well the dynamic between the growth of the occupation and the career of the client (Lubove, 1965; Wilensky & Lebeaux, 1965).

The hegemony gained by new child care institutions is reflected in the recent studies on the growth of other child care occupations, namely juvenile work (Hawes, 1971; Platt, 1969) and the day care movement (Rothman, 1973; Steinfelds, 1973). In these cases, the relationship between the social organization of reformers and their ideology contributed to the "invention" of many aspects of delinquency. Platt notes, for example, that the child-saving movement was staffed by white middle-class American women who, appalled at the conditions of the cities and of certain youth within them, attempted to reinstitute the prominent role of the mother in the family by becoming the moral policewomen of children's behavior. The movement emphasized the legislation of the child's life in terms of the enforcement of the child's leisure, recreation, and the prohibition of illicit activities. Those in the movement believed strongly in the removal of the child from corrupting forces; ironically, often this meant removal from the family. However, the families most often examined for impropriety were lower-class families, and middle-class families usually were exempt from such a review. Liberal in rhetoric but reactionary in practice, the juvenile reform movement provided a definition of delinquency from above, and was based upon a search by its membership for the more traditional institutional values once important in the raising of the young.

In the same terms, the day care movement received prominence during the 1870's and 1880's from well-meaning, upper-class women who had time to attend board meetings and influence wealthy friends to donate time and money. Concerned with the negative effects of institutionalizing neglected children, they conceived of day care as a substitute home wherein the things that children "should" learn about could be taught to children left by working mothers. Surely these charitable women perceived themselves as being quite responsive to the needs of working mothers, but their *noblesse oblige* often resulted in the

type of care they thought these children should have, often to the exclusion of the care that the natural mothers preferred.

The child who became the target of these professional workers—the child from the lower class and predominantly immigrant background—was seen as a product of his environment. Although the “nature vs. nurture” argument was far from resolved in the late nineteenth century, professional correctional administrators and social servants generally favored environmental determinism, a theory that proclaimed hope for the child if he could be removed from the environment that led to his poverty, poor habits, or delinquency. This ideology, at least espoused by professionals, was a continuation of the more “liberal” ideology prevalent in social welfare circles during the early and middle part of the nineteenth century (Katz, 1968; Rothman, 1971). In these terms, institutions (e.g., schools) were the best weapon against crime. If the child could be removed from his poor environment, be given the proper training and infused with the correct values, then he might have the internal character to survive and indeed rise above the corrupting influences of the city.

These ideologies and commensurate actions influenced, accompanied, and occurred in tandem with the passage of compulsory school attendance legislation, the first of which was passed in Massachusetts in 1852. This law required twelve weeks of school per year, six of which had to be continuous. By 1900, thirty-two states had such laws on the books. The drive for the laws symbolized the marriage of a number of prominent reform movements, the most notable of which were child labor reform, educational reform, philanthropy, and organized labor, although the role of labor can be questioned (Pawa, 1971). All supported compulsory attendance under the rubric of protecting and educating the masses of the nation’s youth, a cause which, as we shall see, had a hollow ring.

The traditional explanation for the enactment of compulsory attendance laws is their association with child labor legislation. According to this interpretation, children were the victims of an unhealthy industrial system that relegated them to servitude and wherein they worked in settings detrimental to their health and character. Child labor was particularly pernicious to most reformers because its practice offended their image of what the family should be—one where the father was the main provider, the mother remained at home, and children only worked to learn how to work but were not responsible to provide the family income. Child labor was wrong, too, because it served to perpetuate the social disorganization of the cities. In order to redress these abuses, children had to be (1) banned from working

until a certain age, and (2) concurrently placed in school and provided the proper education to help them overcome their plight.

Undoubtedly, the abuses of child labor were legion, and though there is truth in this explanation for the sudden appearance of compulsory attendance laws, some nagging questions diminish the explanatory power of compulsory attendance as a means of getting children out of the shops and into the schools.

First, the earliest compulsory attendance laws often were ineffective and, for all intents and purposes, existed only on paper. Thus the degree to which they helped keep children from being exploited in the labor market was small. School officials themselves referred to the laws as dead letters or "a farce" (Bremner, 1956). Indeed, many state superintendents, in an 1889 report, indicated that local education officials were unaware that compulsory attendance laws existed in their states. Ages on records were falsified, and the legislation itself was worded very vaguely. In New York, the first compulsory attendance bill was passed in 1874, but no funds were allocated for its enforcement until 1894 when a coalition of reformers and educators pushed through a more effective bill. Katz (1976; Note 1) has documented the extent to which the statement made by the superintendent of New York, Andrew Draper, that "We have a compulsory education law upon our statute books, but it is a compulsory law which does not compel" was true almost nationwide.

Furthermore, there seemed little disposition on the part of the public officials to enforce the laws. One reason for the lack of enforcement was the lack of an adequate organization to enforce the laws. The absence of an effective bureaucracy reflects not only the lack of strength in the laws themselves, but more importantly illustrates the initial reservations of many states to transgress too heavily on what was considered unsure ground—the legality of the state to require a family to send its children to school on specified days for designated years (Bremner, 1971). Consequently, the courts themselves often were lax in enforcing the laws, supporting instead the parents' right to supervise and control their children. Judges even criticized the officers who arrested truant children, in some instances, stating that they had no "right" to arrest boys who violated school attendance laws. As late as 1903, there were over fifty thousand violations of the compulsory attendance laws in New York City, yet only thirty-two resulted in conviction (Stambler, 1971).

And why should the laws be enforced when the schools often were deluged with students before the laws were passed? Soloman and Landes (1972) and Fishlow (1966b) both report that financial investment in education was significant before the passage of

compulsory attendance laws, and that the laws "appear merely to have formalized what was already an observed fact" (Soloman & Landes, 1972, pp. 77-78). For two decades previous to the enactment of compulsory attendance, educators in Boston had encouraged schooling through public persuasion, charity, and a range of options such as evening and primary schools. By the late 1840's their evangelical campaign had succeeded only too well, as grammar schools had to refuse admittance to many students because of over-crowding (Schultz, 1973). Lazerson (1971) reports that schools in Massachusetts were terribly overcrowded, almost to the point of being hygienically unsafe. In some cities there were at least 10-15 more students per classroom than the number of seats available, and in Chicago, by 1886, there was only one-third of the seats for the number of children legally obliged to attend. By 1881, Philadelphia had to turn away 20,000 students due to shortage of seats. With immigrants being prepped for school before they arrived in the country, it is no wonder that the buildings were full to capacity (Smith, 1969). The schools had been well attended, and compulsory attendance laws did not seem necessary to get most children into the school even when they left the labor force. Most were there already.

Evidence indicating that child labor legislation was "flogging a horse that was already dying" (Kett, 1973) pokes another hole in the child labor-compulsory attendance legislation thesis. Although child labor abuses certainly existed, the employment of children in many industries already had begun to decline by 1870, just the time when child labor legislation was proposed. For example, Lebergott (1964) has shown that the proportion of children from the ages of ten to fifteen employed in mining and industry declined rapidly from 1870 to 1900, much earlier than the Keating-Owen Act of 1916 that abolished child labor on a national scale. State laws passed earlier could have contributed to the rapid decline in the number of children employed, but the existence of a multitude of loopholes in the laws raises serious questions as to their effectiveness.

Thus the touted inviolate alliance between compulsory attendance laws and child labor legislation seems to be due to a function only marginally related to the schooling of youngsters in marketable skills. As we have seen, much of the school-age population attended school before compulsory laws were passed, but there were children who did not attend or who attended only sporadically. Accordingly, the laws were not directed at *all* children, but most specifically to deviant minorities not actively participating in the march to the public school. The laws, then, were directed manifestly at the conditions of social disorganization, and specifically to those groups who evidenced these

characteristics. The children from the bottom of the social structure were, by avoiding school, not subject to the homogenizing and socializing effect of the school, and if the school was to become a surrogate family by instilling proper mores into those most likely to disrupt the social fabric, then that designated group had to be compelled to come under its influences. The support for the laws and the eventual pressure to enforce them arose, not from concern for the education of all American youth, but rather from fear of the growing contamination of the native stock by foreigners with different customs, values, and views of reality (Field, 1976).

As was mentioned earlier, it is more than coincidental that compulsory attendance laws were enacted at a time when those who differed most and accordingly were perceived as most ignorant—Southern and Eastern Europeans—arrived in the greatest numbers. In reaction to their increased omnipresence, Ellwood Cubberley (1909) later said of them:

These southern and eastern Europeans are of a very different type from the northern Europeans who preceded them. Illiterate, docile, lacking in self-reliance and initiative, and not possessing Anglo-Teutonic conceptions of law, order, and government, their coming has served to dilute tremendously our national stock and to corrupt our civic life. The great bulk of these people have settled in the cities . . . our task is to break up the groups or settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as a part of our American race, and to implant in their children so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conceptions of righteousness, law and order, and popular government, and to awaken in them a reverence for our democratic institutions and for those things in our national life which we as a people hold to be of abiding worth. (pp. 15-16)

To understand Cubberley's statement we must remember that around the mid-nineteenth century, Irish arrived in large numbers, particularly during the Irish famine of 1846-51. Few groups had threatened the perpetuation of the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, Western tradition prior to that period, but the arrival of the Irish Catholics accelerated the growth of "know-nothingism," which reached its antebellum peak in 1856 when Millard Fillmore, the party's candidate, received 25% of the vote. Know-nothingism and other anti-Catholic movements revealed the long-held fear of Catholicism by the Protestant majority—a fear which they had brought with them from Europe. To many, Catholic immigrants represented tools of the papacy, involved in a plan to subvert

American liberty, patriotism, education, Protestantism—indeed, all that had been held dear.

The fact that Southern and Eastern Europeans were immigrants was one thing—the strong probability that they were Catholic was another; and the last half of the nineteenth century saw a resurgence of anti-Catholic feeling. Anti-Catholic literature abounded and gained wide circulation. A host of nativist groups such as the “United Order of Native Americans,” the “Red, White and Blue” and the “Loyal Men of American Liberty” were formed. There is little doubt that drives toward social control, indeed compulsory schooling, were rooted deeply in anti-Catholicism (Greenbaum, 1974). Perhaps it is more than coincidental that Massachusetts, the first state to pass compulsory schooling legislation, was one of the most heavily populated Catholic states in the nation.

The xenophobia that was part of the nation during this time reflected the perceived end of an era—the end of incremental and somewhat orderly growth of the country. Change was seen as more cataclysmic, almost out of hand, a direction that somehow had to be arrested. Burgess (1976) has noted that “pleas and other forms of persuasion continued, but new powers of formal force were added to these timeless informal devices for social compliance” (p. 204). Yet control often was more symbolic than actual, for, as we have seen, control and structuring of social change by requiring school attendance was hardly universally needed, enthusiastically accepted, or initially effective. Yet compulsory attendance laws did serve the purpose of symbolically reinforcing and indeed making explicit the values of the dominant culture—values of a onetime agrarian, rural, and relatively monolithic society deep in the midst of transition to an industrialized, urban, and increasingly pluralistic society. The constant appeal to the imperatives of a monolithic culture transcended the initial apathy and ambivalence that many had for the compulsory attendance laws themselves. As more people were exposed to the “wretches who prey upon society like wild beasts,” they too came to see the need to “Americanize” the animals through mandatory school attendance. There could only be one choice, and for the good of the nation, all had to make it. In the end, the fact that people might make the “wrong” choices prompted the ultimate enforcement of the laws. In so doing, alternatives, options, and variabilities in the education of the young were, for all practical purposes, effectively usurped.

Relevant Patterns of Compulsory Attendance

Earlier, I argued that we needed to understand the antecedents to the passage of compulsory attendance laws in order to

understand the existence and meaning of the laws themselves. The events leading to passage of compulsory attendance laws, however, were not events that focused on schooling alone. Indeed, they were part of what Burgess (1976) has called an Age of Compulsion within which compulsory school attendance was a significant, although not singular, link. The perspective of compulsory attendance and its antecedents leading to and being part of this era of state legitimated domination allows us to unravel certain critical threads about compulsory attendance and examine them in some detail.

First, as I have maintained throughout this essay, the history of compulsory school attendance and its antecedents is the history of the institutionalization of education in American society. In the institutionalization process, the criteria of what constituted the "educated person" became defined increasingly by attendance in the common school and ruled more by standardization and efficiency than in what Calhoun (1973) has termed the "interplay between verbalistic hunches and quantitative evidence that inheres much of the real scientific procedure" (p.334). Rather than emphasizing production of culture, education through compulsory attendance became the consumption of culture. The state, through the evolution of the common school and compulsory attendance, not only effectively compelled attendance in the public school but barred children from access to a range of other educational resources.

Secondly, it appears that compulsory attendance laws had both ideological and structural antecedents dating to the earliest days of the colonies. Ideologically, the original commitment to education that many of the colonists brought to the new world increasingly became translated into schooling. Whereas education once had been basically an informal process, occurring in more or less an opportunistic but nonetheless effective manner, soon it came to be defined as schooling and bore more of the burdens of cultural transmission. Learning was deemed essential in the new society, and if it could not be gained through existing institutions, then new ones had to be created to assume the teaching of not only technical but moral skills. Gradually, the faith which early Americans had in education was transmitted from the process of education itself to the school as the institution within which that process had to occur. Increasingly, the school became a significant tool of social purpose.

These ideological underpinnings of education and schooling should not be underestimated, nor should they be seen merely as part of the "success" literature of the public school. Devotion to education was strong, particularly throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even before the immigrant ar-

rived in this country, often he pored over dictionaries and language books in preparation for his new life. Most people were "primed" for school as part of their civic responsibility, and school attendance came to be construed as part of the expanded boundary of citizenship so that a future "good citizen" attended school in the same vein that voting signified participatory membership in the larger society (Dreeben, 1971).

Structurally, the antecedents to compulsory attendance laws can be seen by examining the nexus between the family and the school, particularly evident in the inception, rise, and expansion of the Common School. As I have indicated throughout this paper, changes in the family and education occurred simultaneously and, in many cases, reinforced each other. The increasing isolation of the family from its more extended connections, together with geographical mobility and the rise of the industrial organization, contributed to the decreasing ability of the family to teach youngsters relevant skills and values. Out of this hiatus came the need for new agencies to fill those needs.

The existence of a uniform, publicly supported common school system was perhaps the most significant structural foundation contributing to the eventual passage of compulsory attendance laws. Compulsory attendance legislation could never have been passed had state-supported schools not already predominated, and the Common School provided the necessary channel into which legislation concerned with schooling could be placed. The very fact that the school was supported publicly increased the state's dominant role as the surrogate parent, thus facilitating expanded legislation based upon the principle of *parens patriae*. The important factor was a school *system*, in Mann's terms, and had such a system not existed, it is difficult to envision how the state eventually could have legitimated a mandate that all children had to go to school for a specific portion of their lives. First, it had to establish a school where everyone would attend, and then determine what people would do once there; only then could the concept of compulsory attendance be viable.

A third theme arising in our examination of the antecedents of compulsory school attendance centers on the shift in the primary role of the school from one of giving students the blessings of America to one of keeping them from its evils. Whereas reformers and school supporters of the first quarter of the nineteenth century spoke of the glories of schooling as a means of facilitating the child's knowledge of moral certitude and preparation for a God-fearing life, reformers of the last half of the century supported schooling as the last hope of the nation to extricate itself from the "villainous maladies feasting themselves upon the body politic." While schooling as moral socialization was as prevalent in the eighteenth century as in the late nineteenth, the moral

worlds of each era were different. The theme of socialization in the early nineteenth century was preparation of the student for a better world, one full of promises and blessings for the righteous. Socialization of the late nineteenth century emphasized the protection of society—that society could only be saved if individuals were taught to respect its mores. Whisby (1968) compares this shift in emphasis and notes that “after 1870 . . . the general debate about the child continues to be colored more by ideas of what America needs than what the child is or deserves” (p. 102). The advent of compulsory attendance did not stress that the child needed, but rather what the society demanded. Schooling, and particularly the advent of compulsory attendance by the late nineteenth century, graphically demonstrated the degree to which Americans had lost sight of the family as an effective social unit and had “discovered” the child as the entity for a redirection of society.

This emphasis on the school as a custodial as opposed to an enlightening institution is not without its parallels in other institutions. Rothman (1971) has pointed out that a significant shift in the ideology of those responsible for the administration of asylums, almshouses, and penitentiaries occurred in the mid-nineteenth century. Wherein such institutions once were ruled by the rhetoric of reform and optimism, they had turned into custodial institutions by the middle of the nineteenth century. Middle class reformers saw these institutions housing foreign born, the poor, and the lower class. They believed, in addition, that the optimism of moral reform had been unwarranted, as these institutions were inhabited by individuals who seldom responded to treatments meant to lead to a well-ordered society. Reformers then concluded that many inhabitants were incurable, and that incarceration and custodial care were the only viable alternatives to save society from their presence.

Images toward the poor changed as well. Society, in the minds of many nineteenth century Americans, needed protection from the poor who were everywhere but not necessarily in workhouses. As people associated crime and violence with poverty, attitudes towards the poor changed from one of assistance at the local level and poverty as a natural state of man to one reflecting the increased institutionalization of those on poverty, reflecting their criminal nature (Mohl, 1973; Trattner, 1973). Whereas assistance to the poor early in the nineteenth century was a service to the individual person, assistance soon turned to care as a mechanism for social control. The only relief for poverty was work, but work often was difficult to find in a nation flooded by 25 million immigrants and racked by three depressions in the late nineteenth century.

The question of what constituted usurpation during different

periods of our history is another point illuminated by our tracing of schooling from universalism to usurpation. Recalling the earlier parts of this essay, the involvement of the public sector in the schooling process was avoided at all costs up to the early nineteenth century, and the private schools were seen as free or liberating. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, private schools were perceived to discriminate against the poor and emphasized narrow and sectarian doctrines rather than expansive thinking and the common framework to be part of the American experience. Henceforth, the public common school burgeoned into prominence as the most liberating and free of all institutional arrangements. Ironically, the current lack of faith in our public educational institutions suggests we have come the full circle.

The final and, in some ways, most significant theme emerging from our examination of the antecedents is that compulsion was not needed in order to force children to attend school. Children already were attending school in great numbers, even to the degree that schools had to turn clients away from lack of space. Furthermore, the laws themselves were unenforced and unenforceable until early in the twentieth century. In this sense, then, compulsory attendance laws lagged behind the need for them, as they did not serve the purpose for which they ostensibly were passed.

Why then were the laws passed in such rapid order by the end of the nineteenth century? Tyack (1976) has offered that the original passage of laws and their existence up to shortly before the turn of the twentieth century can be called the symbolic phase in the history of compulsion. During this period, there was serious ideological debate about compulsion, but little in the way of mechanisms to enforce the legislation that was based on the dominant ideologies. To the degree that this position is true, then we must inquire further that if the laws were not important for their manifest purposes, then what did they symbolize?

Compulsion and the various campaigns for compulsion took the form of a symbolic campaign to focus the attention of the citizenry on threats to the resiliency of the social fabric. Just as Field (1976) has demonstrated that the rise of the common school was dependent more upon the actions of economic elites to preserve public order than as a result of changes in the structure of the economic marketplace, so did the campaign for compulsion serve a similar purpose. Individuals and groups of individuals who could influence the political process were unsure of the effect of rapid changes and attempted to mediate them through the creation of institutions that would reduce diversity to a common denominator. Participation in the society became predi-

cated on the assumption of majoritarian values, life styles, and institutional arrangements by all people. This is not to say that groups such as reformers, businessmen, school personnel, or politicians were selfish or malicious in their attempts to control the forces of change through compulsory attendance, although selfish and venal persons did exist. Realistically, however, supporters of compulsory attendance had much to lose if more effective forms of social control were not found, and thus it is natural they would pursue their own self-interest. Rather than being based upon conscious efforts to deceive, the ideology of supporters of compulsory attendance was evidenced in the continuous attempts to construct symbolic presentations of their legitimate role and, by extension, the legitimate organization of those social institutions within which their role was defined.⁷

Marris (1974) and later Cohen (1976) have raised the role of "loss" as precipitating social policy. Currently, loss motivates public support of the death penalty despite strong evidence that it is not a deterrent, affects resistance to desegregation, and even helps explain our inability to devise a comprehensive national energy policy in spite of overwhelming odds that we have little choice. In education, loss as a theme helps explain the increased emphasis on "basic" education and resistance to educational change in general. That theme seems equally relevant to understand the symbolic dimensions of compulsory attendance. The

⁷ The rise of compulsory attendance resulted in a form of social control, but this does not necessarily imply naked imposition by one class upon another. There was little organized resistance against the actual passage of the legislation (although once passed it often was ignored), and that may indicate general public support for the manifest intentions of the legislation. The evidence on this is mixed, however, and the lack of effective enforcement until almost the turn of the twentieth century indicates the lack of commitment for the laws by many in authority.

Overall, however, one must remember that the educational system, as it has developed, has favored elites, reformers, and majoritarian views at the expense of social and cultural minorities. Thus, indoctrination and socialization of youth into majoritarian social/political values and behaviors has been a long-term consequence of the common school and compulsory attendance. Requiring attendance and permitting few viable options other than the public system, thereby eliminating alternatives and competing ideologies, constitutes a form of social control as effective as the raw control claimed by Katz (1971), Karier (1975), and others. Social control, then, as I have used the concept in this paper, does not mean that a generalized fear of disorder resulted in the practice of deceit to control others. Rather, social control, as manifested in compulsory attendance, resulted from an ideological position based upon self-deception in interaction with long-standing majoritarian interests and cultural traditions. This conception of social control is fundamentally more "radical" (in the literal sense) than that proposed by many revisionist historians because it places the root of these ideologies in material or class interests rather than in the suspect motives of those holding the ideologies.

general anxieties of the dominant majority about change and the inability to control it on their terms were crystallized in the perceived causal relationship between the concentration of cultural minorities and forms of social disorganization. The school, by compelling attendance, could help combat social disorganization in the short run by serving as a custodial institution, thereby keeping youth away from uncontrolled influences found in the work place, the street, and the family. The school could arrest social disorganization in the long run by socializing youth into the economic order and making them producers for the system, and, incidentally, themselves. Symbolically, then, compulsory attendance laws served in the increasing search to legitimate and reconstruct the benefits of stability, order, and a uniformly intended citizenry believed to have been once present but now lost.

The Past—and Looking Forward

I have attempted to review the antecedents to compulsory attendance laws and propose interpretations of why those laws emerged. This paper represents only a modest beginning in an examination of an important issue, for compulsory school attendance is important, not only in itself, but as it signifies the institutional parameters of education and the manner in which those parameters help define the degree of significant change that can occur within and among various elements of that institution (Everhart, Note 2).

In general, since the institutionalization of compulsory school attendance laws in tandem with the dominance of the public school, youth have had fewer options for formal education than they did one to two centuries ago. I do not doubt that the requirement for virtually all children to attend a public school for significant periods of their lives provided learning experiences for some that may not have been possible without such legislation. Yet, if we could hold constant a cross-section of youth for a period from the late 18th to the late 20th century and expose them to learning as education was defined throughout that time, the diversity of opportunities wherein youth could learn formally has decreased. Compulsory school attendance may have been liberating for some, but its long-range effect has been to restrict the options by which most children can be educated.

I began this paper with the observation that many in policy circles are reexamining compulsory attendance, a condition that guarantees that future debates will ensue over whether compulsory attendance as presently constituted should be altered. The National Education Association, as noted earlier, now favors

some modification of compulsory attendance. We should remember, however, that in 1891 superintendents in the NEA placed great faith in the school's role to bring all children under its control through compulsory attendance when they passed a resolution supporting compulsion. That faith apparently dashed, educators and others are now placing strong (as well as naive and possibly misdirected) faith in the role of the larger society to find appropriate learning experiences for students disinterested in school. Illich (1970), who goes even further, has campaigned for the removal of compulsory school attendance, but with little consideration for what should take its place. Simply removing control by schools does not necessarily leave control to students or parents, but rather places control in the hands of other parts of the social and nonsocial environment and leaves unresolved questions such as what aspects of the larger environment control the lives of youth, if control in these zones is preferable to control by schools, and who benefits (or loses) by such a shift. Institutions in our society have become increasingly complex and interdependent, and if we envision more of them accepting formal responsibility for the education of the young, then we had better have in mind—and indeed tested—options before we alter the legislation itself. Compulsory school attendance has shaped our society and the life cycle of every member in it, and the steps taken to alter such a pervasive channeling force must be sagaciously considered. A keen historical perspective on the antecedents to and consequences of compulsory attendance laws can help demystify our current perspective of the laws, ultimately informing educational policy. Hopefully, an understanding of the roots of compulsory attendance will prevent the pouring of new wine into old bottles, as well as perpetuation of the very ideologies that spawned compulsory attendance itself over a century ago.

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