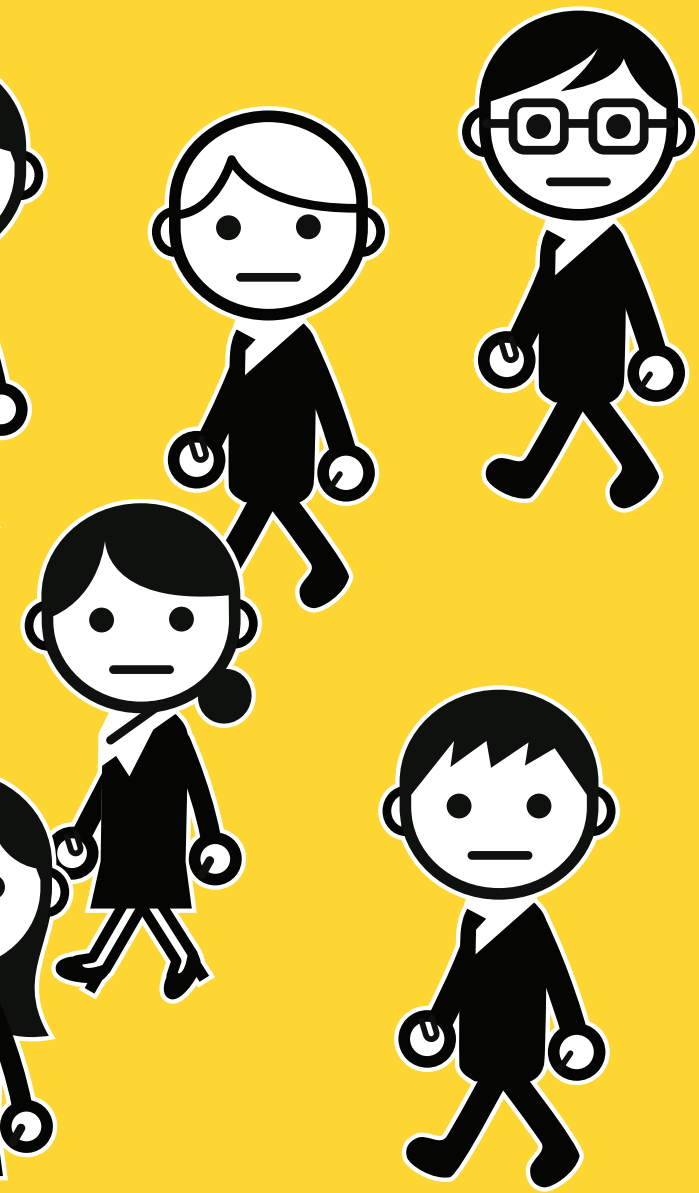


# **HOMESCHOOLING** *is a* **THREAT** *to* **PUBLIC EDUCATION**

**BUT NOT FOR THE REASONS  
YOU MIGHT THINK**

BY B.K. MARCUS





According to my local government, this is my fifth year as a homeschooling dad. That's how long state law has required us to file the paperwork.

In that time, I've heard homeschoolers called elitists (because not everyone can afford to educate their own children), snobs (because it is assumed that we look down on those who send their kids to group schools), religious fanatics (because, well, aren't all homeschoolers Bible-thumping snake handlers or something?), hippies (because if you're not locking your kid up with a Bible, you must be one of those barefoot, patchouli-scented unschoolers), negligent (because what about socialization?), and just plain selfish.

All the epithets sting, but that last one feels the most unfair.

We are selfish, apparently, because we're focused on the well-being of our own children and families instead of the larger community. But not only do many homeschooling families devote their time to volunteer work and charity, and not only do we evolve spontaneous extended community co-ops, but some parents also become ardent activists, making homeschooling a political movement and not just a personal choice.

## THERE'S SOMETHING TO BE SAID FOR A NONIDEOLOGICAL MOVEMENT AWAY FROM THE STATE'S EDUCATION CARTEL.

That activism has at least one academic calling for greater government scrutiny of homeschooling families.

In a summer 2015 *City Journal* article, "Homeschooling in the City," Matthew Hennessey quotes Georgetown law school professor Robin L. West, who "worries that homeschooled children grow up to become right-wing political 'soldiers,' eager to 'undermine, limit, or destroy state functions.'"

I assume that for West, the "right-wing" label subsumes all of us who seek to "undermine, limit, or destroy state functions"—you know, people like John Locke, Tom Paine, and Henry David Thoreau.

I almost wish West's fears were better founded.

Very few of the homeschoolers I know, whether on the



right or the left, are eager to curtail the growing scope of government—except when the bureaucracy tries to reach into their homes and families. Many of the homeschooling dads I know are in the military, many of the moms drive cars with Obama bumper stickers, and many of the kids started out in public school before their parents decided they would be better educated outside the system. The activists are focused on education and on parents' rights. Beyond those immediate issues, there's little consensus on the proper scope of government power in areas outside of education.

It used to frustrate me that there are so few classical liberals in evidence in the diverse and active homeschooling community where I live. But there's something to be said for a nonideological movement away from the state's education cartel.

The American Founders (whom West, no doubt, considers "right-wing") saw the future of freedom in the idea of decentralization: small governments should have to compete for citizens, akin to businesses having to compete for customers. Citizens who were dissatisfied could vote with their feet, leaving behind the territorial government that failed to serve their needs. It was, after all, such freedom of movement that had allowed individual liberty and general prosperity to grow, however imperfectly, in late-medieval Europe.

That liberalization was not the result of ideology. It was the effect of exit.

If landlords were too rough on the peasants, the peasants could seek a better situation elsewhere. Feudal law said they couldn't, but the reality was that they could—especially in the post-Plague era. So compensation grew and working conditions improved, despite a widespread belief in the Great Chain of Being, a doctrine that stood against such changes.

If local princes interfered too much with nearby markets, merchants could pick up and leave. Other principalities welcomed them into freer local economies. Again, this liberalizing migration was not the result of enlightened rulers or ideologically motivated migrants; it was the consequence of fragmented authority and easy exit.

We live in an era when territorial authority has grown larger and ever more centralized. There is less political power behind the threat of departure when the rules are so similar everywhere you go. But there are other ways to leave Leviathan. Technology helps us outcompete the state, drawing ever more people away from government regulations and cartels. These defectors are savvy and self-interested; they are not necessarily ideological. The sharing economy couldn't thrive if it depended on philosophical converts.

Homeschooling took off before the advent of digital peer-to-peer technology, but the idea is similar: those who think they can do better than the monopoly system simply choose to leave that system, whether or not the law acknowledges that option. Through peer networking, homeschoolers, like generations of migrants before them, have sought alternatives outside the norm, leading to the kind of innovation that centralized systems inhibit.

Between 1970 and 2012, the number of American children educated at home grew from 10,000 to 1.77 million, according to economist Walter Williams.

Professor West and other advocates of big government are right to be worried by those numbers, but not because homeschooled kids are learning any anti-government ideology at home. The greatest threat that homeschooling poses to the government system is its diversity, its resiliency, and its undisputed academic success.

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Homeschooling looks ever more appealing as an alternative to public education. That pressures public schools to make staying put more attractive. It pressures legislatures to explore options such as charter schools and school choice. As the government schools lose their monopoly status, the competition benefits even the families who never consider the alternatives.

I'm too new to homeschooling to take much credit, but we can thank those thousands of pioneers in the 1960s and '70s, and the millions of families over

the decades since then, who quietly withdrew their children and their consent, and selfishly attended to the well-being of their own families. ■

**B.K. Marcus** is editor of the Freeman. Read more at [FEE.org/Marcus](http://FEE.org/Marcus).



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