

# Homeschooling's Liberalism

by David Mills

**T**he other day someone asked about our children, and my answer worried him, or at least he claimed to be concerned.

When they hear the answer to their question, many people get a look on their faces similar, I imagine, to the look they'd get if I said we refused to have our children vaccinated or let them keep rattlesnakes as pets. We homeschool our two youngest, and have done so since they were in kindergarten, with the exception of two years early on at our parochial school.

The response varies. A few people say something nice, with some of them telling you how they'd wished they had done so, or wished they could have done so, some of those explaining a little defensively why they couldn't. Most people suddenly furrow their brows and purse their lips and declare their concerns about homeschooling, which seem always to be less often about the quality of the education as about the children's "socialization." Although the people who say something nice are almost always religious and conservative, the people with the quickly furrowed brows are either religious or secular, and I've been surprised to find out how many seriously religious and politically very conservative people dislike home schooling and jump to tell you so.

It's a little disconcerting, their apparent concern for making sure our children fit into the society as it is. There is something both aggressive and unctuous in their alleged concern for my children that really annoys me. My wife, who is much more charitable than I am in dealing with

annoying people, answers them politely, and sets about to reassure them by telling them about the homeschooling groups to which our children go several days a week and all the other activities they are involved in. Some seem satisfied, others clearly aren't. I have so far resisted the temptation to put my hand on their shoulder, look them in the eye, and ask, "Why is it so important to you that my children be squeezed into the same mold as everyone else?"

I didn't come to this feeling the usual way. I first heard of homeschooling as a child growing up in a college town in New England, when the only people who homeschooled their children were hippies living on communes in the country or academics and political activists protesting against the regimented and regimenting education "the system" provided for its own repressive purposes.

No one I knew ever blinked at the idea of raising children outside the public school system, and indeed it had the romantic appeal such counter-cultural endeavors enjoyed in those days. It was a little odd, perhaps, but if asked to express an opinion most people would have shrugged and said that it takes all types to make a world, and many would have said something supportive. If some people wanted to opt out of the system and do things their own way, bully for them. If they wanted to raise their fist against the establishment, three cheers. Thomas Jefferson, by consensus I think our favorite founding father, would have approved. Let, as we heard from time to time, a thousand flowers bloom.

Indeed the desire of the counter-cultural types to take charge of the

education of their own children seemed a reasonable extension of the kind of liberty we were being taught, in the public school, that America had been founded to protect, and a rational response to the kind of oppressive social control some of the cooler teachers taught (this was a college town, as I said) capitalist society imposed.

One of my social studies teachers expounded Herbert Marcuse's idea of "repressive tolerance," telling us that we were not free even though we seemed to be, and in fact that the system itself controlled us through what we thought were free choices. I'm not sure we completely got our minds around that idea, but it reinforced the feeling that the good life was found in opposition to the establishment.

**E**ven then, I think, I and others recognized the importance of what Burke called the "little platoons" and others later called "mediating institutions," though the only terms we had for such things were drawn from anarchism. We had a vision of social difference and diversity, which we were taught was threatened by the homogenizing effects of late industrial capitalism, symbolized even then by white bread and processed cheese. The good life, the good society, was one in which all sorts of groups—families, clubs, co-operative societies, small towns run by boards of elders—lived the lives they wanted to live in a creative interaction governed by the spirit of living and letting live.

Those thousand flowers were—this is an image that would never have occurred to me then, but captures our idea of spontaneous order and beauty—wild flowers, whose

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beauty resulted from their blooming together as they grew up in nature. They would not have been so beautiful, or not beautiful in the same way, had they been chosen (not all would have been) and planted in rows.

This is the way even then, if only vaguely, I thought about the family. The family is a good thing in itself, but a vulnerable thing that needs to have a life apart from the state, and forms a great part of the institutions needed to resist its always expanding desire to control and direct more and more of society. It was a different world then, I realize: The Marxists I knew were happily married to their first wives, gave their kids curfews and chores, and a few even went to church or synagogue.

Thus I was surprised some years later to find the kind of people with whom I'd grown up—the leftists, the intellectuals, the activists, the public-spirited—suddenly alarmed at the growth of homeschooling. (And I first experienced this surprise when we still expected to send our children to the public schools.)

The critics treated it as a threat to the social order and a source of sectarian divisions. Some expressed concern that homeschooled children would find themselves unable to function in a pluralistic society. Many also argued that they would get an inferior education, but that always seemed to be a secondary concern, and grimly amusing coming from advocates of the near-monopoly of a public school system whose failures were beginning to be lamented even by liberal observers.

The critics found themselves so alarmed, of course, because now politically, culturally, and religiously conservative parents were educating their children at home and rejecting the influence of a system in which the critics—so many of them former countercultural types themselves—were heavily invested, and from

which, as a Marxist would note, so many of them drew their salaries.

The homeschoolers were no longer a few hippies and leftists, whose numbers were always going to be small and their influence marginal, and who were reliably leftist anyway. Now the homeschoolers were a growing number of average parents, whose countercultural commitments were of the conservative and not the leftist sort, whose numbers might well increase and their influence grow stronger, particularly if the establishment lost its control over the education of children, which happened to be its primary way of reducing parental influence in, to borrow a famous phrase from my youth, the battle for their hearts and minds.

People who have no obvious stake in the matter, like most of the people who have expressed dismay at my wife and my decision to homeschool our children, tend to side with the establishment against the parents. They've somehow absorbed the key elements of the ideology, like the concern for "socialization," which is either a faux concern for the children's well-being or a real concern for their being educated outside of and probably against the ideas public schools (with exceptions, of course) inculcate and impose.

Before someone remarks that some homeschooling parents are very odd or inept or (in a very few cases) dangerous: Yes, of course, it is not a perfect system. But that doesn't answer the question of who should educate children.

And it's not an argument for the public school monopoly. For one thing, these failures and problems describe the public schools as well, especially if you think some of the ideological commitments that animate a great deal of the educational establishment is dangerous in themselves. I was taught, for example, the Enlightenment mythology of the dark, anti-intellectual ages dominated by the Church and the growth of human

knowledge and freedom brought by those who rejected religion and discovered science. Which is, simply as an historical matter, wrong, and inculcates a religious commitment that is far from neutral.

In any event, the widespread presumption against homeschooling that I have encountered among self-styled liberals is, to someone like me, a very strange reversal. Educating your own children is an act of the kind of freedom I was taught our country provided, a freedom of self-determination that is one of its great glories.

Even leaving out the idea I was also taught, that removing oneself from the system was a laudable act of countercultural liberation, with which I still have some sympathy, to teach one's children oneself, being able to choose curricula and readings and customize the teaching to every child's needs and gifts, is the kind of thing I was taught, by teachers of impeccable liberalism, to praise. It is an expression of liberalism and liberality in public affairs. It is one way of planting some of those thousand flowers.

What I learned then, I believe strongly now: that if mass production is bad in the creation of bread or cheese, it is much worse for the formation of vulnerable human beings. The work should be entrusted only to the craftsman who loves his materials and will have his name on the thing he creates.

As the twig is bent. I can't help but think that homeschooling's unctuous critics have betrayed the American vision of freedom with which I grew up, and rationalized the extension of social control in a way my peers and I learned to see and resist. It can only do our nation good to have parents so invested in their children's education, and it certainly won't hurt the cause of liberty to have the monopoly of the public schools so concretely challenged. Down with the gardeners. Let the flowers bloom. ■

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