

FOREWORD

Judith Suissa

Reading a sociology of education book published in 1971 nearly fifty years after its publication, it is difficult not to situate it within the analytic frameworks offered by work in the field that has informed critical educational thought in the intervening years. In fact at first glance, Nils Christie's text, now translated into English for the first time, may seem to readers to be of a piece with the classic works of deschooling, critical pedagogy, and libertarian education that emerged in the same period, reflecting, as they did, something of a particular political and intellectual milieu. Notably, Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society*, published in the same year as Christie's book, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in English in 1970, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976), John Holt's *How Children Fail* (1964), and Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* (1962), to name but a few significant works of this era, all develop critical accounts of schooling—aspects of which are echoed in Christie's text.

The very title of this short book suggests that the theorist with whom Christie's work may have the most obvious

affinity is Illich. Yet Christie was not a deschooler. The distinctions between his work and that of Illich are, I suggest, at the heart of what makes this book both distinctive and still relevant.

Illich's work, while grounded in an empirical analysis of the economic costs and effects of the mass establishment of state schooling in industrial societies, is also shot through with clear normative visions of education and utopian proposals for how dismantling this system can play a part in the transition to a more "convivial" society (see Illich 1973). While Illich's sociological analysis has been rigorously critiqued in the intervening years, his work still serves a valuable purpose in denaturalizing the institutional features of mass state education systems and reminding readers that "education" is not equivalent to "schooling"—a reminder just as important now as it was fifty years ago.

Christie does not talk about "schooling," however, but rather "schools." The focus of his sociological analysis is not the broad landscape of the institutionalization of education in industrial states but instead the much more modest picture of individual schools in specific places. This, I want to suggest, indicates a rather different ambition and message to the reader from Illich's still-classic text, in spite of some common ethical underpinnings.

Christie is clearly sympathetic to the ethical ideal of conviviality—defined as "individual freedom realized in personal interdependence"—underpinning Illich's work. As indicated in his footnotes, he was familiar with Illich's early writing, yet he does not advocate the dismantling of the school system. There is nothing in Christie's text to suggest that he shares Illich's confidence that "we are witnessing the

end of the age of schooling,” and he was probably not surprised to discover that the rumors of the death of schooling had been greatly exaggerated.

Not only does Christie rarely use the word “schooling,” but in fact the word “education” rarely appears in his book in any context other than as a descriptive reference in phrases such as “the education system” or “the Ministry of Education.” This suggests that Christie is not interested in defending the idea that there is an intrinsically valuable and conceptually defensible ideal of “education” that is being distorted or corrupted by contemporary institutional forms.

I am not a sociologist of education, and perhaps it is a little unfair to read a work in the sociology of education through a philosophical lens. But philosophers of education are accustomed to both reading sociological theories and developing theories of their own with a focus on conceptual and normative questions: What is the point of education? What are schools for? And what do we need to do to create a better or more just education system? While the absence of any prescriptive statements along these lines may lead some readers to experience frustration with Christie’s text, I found this refreshing. What is more, the text leaves the reader with a far more hopeful message than that presented by accounts of the need to demolish and completely rethink the entire school system due to its inherently oppressive, deadening, or manipulative effects on children.

THE ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

The book begins with a detailed description of three very different schools, in different historical and social contexts.

Admittedly, I am relying on the translated text, but it seems to me that the choice of language here is significant and sets the tone for the whole book. The question that Christie poses is, Which ends do our schools serve? He does not ask, Which ends should *schooling* or *state schooling* serve? The body of empirical and theoretical work produced by critical educational theorists in the intervening decades has offered ample theoretical resources for answering this question. Schooling, so we are told, serves the interests of the ruling elite, upholds the capitalist ideological apparatus, stifles children's creativity and independence of thought, undermines human freedom, entrenches structural privilege and oppression, and creates docile consumers. Useful and important as these analytic frameworks may be, Christie is not interested in offering the reader such diagnoses or documenting their workings.

One can, of course, ask who Christie means to include in the first-person plural when referring to "our schools." But throughout most of the text, it is clear that this refers implicitly and sometimes explicitly to Norway. We are offered, in chapter 2, a picture of the simple life of a Norwegian fisherman and his family; they move to the city and become cut off from their traditional ways of life. The point of this story is to illustrate the way in which young people, in this historical and social context, have become "useless." While similar stories could be told about rural communities and young people in many different contemporary industrialized societies, the point is to get the reader to ask themselves whether the schools that we have *here, now, in Norway*, are an appropriate response to this uselessness, and how this can help us make sense of young people's behavior. The three concrete

examples of schools that Christie discusses in great detail in chapter 1 come from different national, cultural, and historical settings: a French village school in the nineteenth century, a state school on a Native American reservation in the 1960s, and a state comprehensive school in the north of England in the 1960s. What is common to all these examples is the theme of the particular school—a school located in a particular community with its own needs as well as its own cultural and political features, being governed by theories, approaches, and regulations that have come from elsewhere.

It would be easy, given these descriptions, to conclude that Christie is just advocating a return to a more locally governed system of schools, accountable perhaps by some democratic mechanism to the communities that it serves. There is certainly nothing in the book to indicate that Christie would not be sympathetic to this argument, and in this sense the book resonates with contemporary calls for more local democratic governance, and warnings against the commodification and standardization of national school systems. Yet many of the advocates of these changes, against a background of neoliberal education policy reforms and attacks on the public provision of education, are doing so as part of a broader defense of public goods, thicker account of democracy, and vision of robust civic participation. I am not suggesting that Christie would have disagreed with any of these positions. But his project is a different one: it is to remind us that, as he puts it, “the inner life of schools parallels the common ways in which we organize ourselves as a society,” and therefore, in any given society, there are questions to be asked about the values and forms of political organization we want to defend, and the corresponding quality and ethos

of what the editors, in their introduction, have termed “the public life of schools.”

This may seem like a subtle difference, and perhaps Christie’s ultimate political vision was not dissimilar to Illich’s. But the kinds of questions that his book prompts readers to ask about their own society and schools are foreclosed if one starts out by positing and defending the view that all schools, by definition, have simply been reduced to the function of certification, replacing genuine learning with “the ritualization of progress” (Illich 1971, 40). For on Illich’s view, the institutional features of state schooling as a universal model have distorted the essential educational value of genuine learning relationships so that the only option is to dismantle schools. Indeed Illich, as Neil Postman says, is “a totalist, not an experimentalist. ... In the face of what he is saying, what true believer can in good conscience do anything about the schools except try to destroy them?” (Illich et al. 1973, 142, 147).

This view is certainly reflected in Illich’s 1969 text “Commencement at the University of Puerto Rico, New York,” which Christie refers to, and where Illich describes how “gradually the idea grew that schooling was a necessary means of becoming a useful member of society.” Illich goes on to declare that “it is the task of this generation to bury that myth” and confidently predict that “by the end of this century, what we now call school will be a historical relic. ... I feel sure that it will soon be evident that the school is as marginal to education as the witch doctor is to public health.”

Christie is not interested in convincing anyone of the mythological status of schooling or its inevitable demise. He seems more intent, in fact, on offering us pictures of how

schools can become valuable, organic, and flourishing social institutions than on lamenting their uselessness. In this respect, he seems to have less in common with the radical deschoolers than with the leading philosopher of American pragmatism, John Dewey (1916, 101), who insisted that “we cannot set up, out of our heads, something we regard as an ideal society. We must base our conception upon societies which actually exist.” For Dewey (1916, 96), education is a social process, not a preparation for life, and as such, is organically connected to his conception of democracy as “primarily a form of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience.”

Like Christie, Dewey situated his philosophical reflections on education firmly within the practical demands and problems thrown up by complex contemporary societies. In *The School and Society*, Dewey (1907, 32) argued that given the shifts in labor and family structure in contemporary society, “the school must become the new ‘child’s habitat,’ where he learns through directed living.” Christie’s images of successful schools are, similarly, not nostalgic longings for a bygone age but rather reminders of the importance of ensuring that the places where children spend their days are good places to be—places that are, as Dewey (1907, 27) put it, “a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons.”

On Christie’s view, we can and should entertain the possibility that schools could be, and many of them already are, these kinds of places. Rather than seeing all schools through the lens of institutionalized state schooling, Christie urges us to examine individual schools in particular contexts as sites where, if we look closely, we can uncover and understand

aspects of ourselves and our society as well as possibilities for living differently. Thus to paraphrase Postman, Christie is an experimentalist, not a totalist.

Illich, in contrast, like so many educational theorists, cannot resist offering his own normative definition of education, which serves as a lens with which to critique everything that he sees as wrong with the current system of schooling. “The dynamic underdevelopment that is now taking place,” Illich (1969) argued, “is the exact opposite of what I believe education to be: namely, the awakening awareness of new levels of human potential and the use of one’s creative powers to foster human life.”

There is no such independent normative definition of education offered in Christie’s book. Christie merely urges us to look at what schools are doing—and *what else* they are doing, besides and in spite of the institutional logic identified by Illich, and think about whether they are doing it well or in ways that we want to preserve.

Thus the detail of Christie’s analysis is important. In his description of the pedagogical processes that go on in different schools there are, again, echoes of other contemporary critical theorists. Notably, Christie’s description of teachers’ refusal to build on top of “what the students already know” and reference, in this context, to the idea of students as “empty rooms” is clearly reminiscent of Freire’s (1970) idea of “banking education.” Similarly, Christie’s remarks about children’s experience of the often arbitrary and oppressive institutional features of life in school may chime with Holt’s astute and at times hilarious observations of children and teachers in his classic *How Children Fail*. Yet Christie does not seem to subscribe to the pedagogical defense of libertarian

education developed by Holt, nor to the more moral, children's rights-based defense of the libertarian education of A. S. Neill (see Smith 1983, 64). There are in fact no general claims made in Christie's text about "children" or "childhood." Like the British anarchist Colin Ward in his seminal work *The Child in the City* (1978), Christie is concerned above all to note how the world that children inhabit, and their ability to move through and interact with it, has changed dramatically in urban industrial societies. "Cities are not built for children, cars are not built for children, machines do not need them, and adults do not need them. ... [O]ur society is not structured to accommodate having children around all the time." Christie's discussion of the place of children in contemporary society is clearly informed by his work in sociology and particularly the sociology of deviance. In a society where children "are no longer 'useful' workers," they will, as he puts it, "probably have to be given an extra margin for deviance in other areas of life." Like Paul Goodman in *Growing Up Absurd*, Christie viewed the "deviant" behavior of contemporary teenagers and young people as reflecting something important about social structures and values. Yet while Goodman (1996, 16, 31) became an advocate of deschooling, arguing in *Compulsory Mis-education* that it is simply "a mass superstition, that adolescents must continue going to school," and many young people "might be better off if the system simply did not exist," Christie seemed more optimistic that schools could be the kinds of places that would allow children to experience a sense of meaning and be treated as useful members of society, working and learning alongside adults in their communities. It is this sense that is implied by the book's title, *If Schools Didn't Exist*, which hints

not at the need to abolish schooling but instead at the possibility of blurring the boundaries between an ideal model of “the school” and the daily social reality of life in schools.

In short, while Holt, who became a prominent champion of home schooling, believed that “children love to learn but hate to be taught,” Christie offers no such sweeping analyses or conclusions. His concern, rather, is with ensuring that schools fulfill their basic social function of providing children with “a place to be.” While there will undoubtedly be learning and teaching going on in this place, the main question is whether it is one that is integrated into versus set apart from society, and one where children feel that they have something meaningful and useful to do as members of that society. There are important distinctions as well as overlaps between different positions within the broad tradition of libertarian and democratic education (see Shotton 1993, Smith 1983; Suissa 2019). Christie’s approach, if situated within this tradition, suggests a greater affinity with educational theorists such as Dewey and educators such as John Aitkenhead at Kilquhanity who saw the school as a community of adults and children “living together, sharing, loving,” and engaged in “useful work” (see Shotton 1993, 109–116), than with libertarians or deschoolers such as Holt or Illich.

None of this is to suggest that in his insistence on focusing on the detail of what specific schools in different contexts are doing, Christie was oblivious to broader theoretical analyses of the social function of schooling. Like Bowles and Gintis (1976) in *Schooling in Capitalist America*, he was only too aware of schools’ central role in “granting admission passes to the class structure of society,” and was clearly familiar with the body of sociological research where “study after study comes

to exactly the same conclusion: there is a crucial correlation between the family's social position (measured as the parents' professional standing) and the child's completed level of schooling." Likewise, he anticipates many later analyses of the inevitable effects on young people condemned to, as Patrick Ainley and Martin Allen (2013, 171) put it, "running up a down-escalator of devalued qualifications" in the shifting labor markets of global capitalism. As Christie observes, "There was a time when primary and lower secondary school attendance functioned reasonably well as an access point to advantages for the minority," and he predicted presciently, in 1971, that "we will soon hear the calls for twelve years of compulsory schooling, so once again everyone will be placed on equal footing." Yet while critical educational theorists have often drawn on a Marxist analysis to argue that schools can and should become sites of resistance (see Giroux 1981, 1983), Christie's reading of these theoretical frameworks is rather more cautious. As evident in his seminal text "Conflicts as Property," regarded as a modern classic in the field of restorative justice, Christie was not a Marxist theorist. While aspects of his criticism of top-down models of state schooling reflect both Marxist reproduction theory and a Marxist theory of alienation, as commentators have noted (Koen 2013, 208), he "does not rely upon the concept of the mode of production as an analytical tool." When he states "if schools didn't exist, society would still need a way to funnel its citizens into the various jobs found in society," Christie is clearly not taking the existing capitalist class structure as given, but nor is he wedded to the category of class as a basic tool for analyzing alternative social structures. It is not entirely apparent from the text whether Christie fully appreciates the

satirical intent of Michael Young's (1958) *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. But I doubt he would be surprised to discover that in contemporary Britain, the "myth of Young," as he calls it, is now advocated without a shred of irony by politicians who proudly declare their intention to make Britain into a "great meritocracy" (May 2016). Nor would Christie have been remotely surprised that while this myth is conveniently sustained by "celebrated examples of *extraordinary individuals* who have managed to break through the limitations of their heritage and educate themselves into the upper echelons of society," in the intervening decades, further sociological research has only confirmed the fact that "*most people stay where they are born*" (see Pickett and Vanderbloemen 2015). The 1970s' literature on how and why state schools ensure that "working class kids get working class jobs" (Willis 1978) cannot fully account for the links between educational qualifications and social structure, especially in a context where most traditional "working-class" jobs have disappeared. These links are still apparent, however, and if anything, the ways in which educational opportunities reflect and entrench socioeconomic privilege is more evident in the current era of late capitalism where, as well documented by Thomas Piketty (2014), it is inherited wealth and property as well as earnings that preserve the position of socioeconomic elites.

Yet it does not follow that, as Christie puts it, "If the schools ceased to exist, a veil would be torn away. We would experience firsthand the significance of birthright." This would only be true, of course, *all other things being equal*—in other words, if we failed to make any other major political changes such as the redistribution of wealth. The criticism that state schooling upholds a meritocratic myth while

reproducing socioeconomic privilege is contingently valid in societies where there is a significant degree of structural socioeconomic inequality, and a system that links educational certification with access to differential positions in an unequally structured labor market. Political and educational theorists have dealt with this critique in a number of different ways. One response could be, as Illich (1971, 19) argues, to “detach competence from curriculum.” But like Christie’s tearing down of the veil, in the absence of any structural socioeconomic reform, this may entrench or even increase socioeconomic inequality, given that privileged parents would likely find ways to maintain their position of privilege by giving their children a competitive edge in an unequal and competitive system. Some philosophers of education have contended that precisely because we live in a competitive capitalist system, where education constitutes a “positional good,” well-funded high-quality public schooling is essential as a means to mitigate against the worst effects on children’s educational opportunities of their parents’ socioeconomic background.

As Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift (2006, 488) explain, “The person with more education has better prospects for income and for accessing interesting and responsible jobs, because there is a causal link between education and labor market prospects. But it is not simply having more education that makes the person’s income prospects better. It is having more education in an environment in which that causal link holds.”

Although Brighouse and Swift (2006, 490) suggest many ways in which the causal link between relative education and absolute income could be eliminated (e.g., by equalizing

wage rates), they acknowledge that this “may just not be possible—perhaps only because politically unacceptable—in the circumstances.” This presumably explains Brighthouse’s (2000, 15) preference, in the absence of any such major overthrow of the socioeconomic system, for a state system of education where “the government must attempt, as far as is possible while respecting other central values, to eliminate the effects of social class on achievement.” In contrast, James Tooley (2003, 439), a proponent of removing state control of schooling in favor of private alternatives, has asserted that “if there are still limited (positional) goods to compete for,” then in a more equal state schooling system, “hierarchically-inclined families are going to be even more concerned that they give children additional educational opportunities outside of schooling” (e.g., private tuition or extracurricular activities) so as to preserve and pass on their privilege.

All these arguments, of course, are framed within the basic assumption of the capitalist state. While Christie does not take a view on whether the state as such should fund and regulate schools, as his obituary notes, he “was never an anarchist advocate of radical de-institutionalization” (Lomell and Halvorsen 2015, 143). In fact, in his comment, “Can we tolerate such a system? Let us, in any case, try to minimize its impacts,” he seems to be taking a position closer to that of Brighthouse and other defenders of educational justice within a state system, than to that of Illich or advocates of private markets in education, such as Tooley (2003), John Chubb and Terry Moe (1990), or Milton Friedman (1962).

As a growing body of research is showing, in the absence of any radical changes to the background socioeconomic structure, policy reforms ostensibly granting schools and parents

greater freedom from central control have done little to reduce educational inequalities (see Allen and Higham 2018; Pickett and Vanderbloemen 2015). In the UK context, recent policy changes in this direction have not been an organic, community-led initiative involving greater local democratic control of schools but instead have gone hand in hand with a top-down system of standards and testing, and a neoliberal agenda that has encouraged corporate and commercial bodies to be involved in the provision of educational services. In this context, as Toby Greany and Rob Higham (2018) observe, despite the government's claims to be "moving control to the frontline" and giving schools more autonomy, the reality is quite different. Increasing levels of standardization, performance management, and accountability measures have led to pressures on schools along with "incentives to act 'selfishly' in a highly regulated marketplace" (12). The result has been "a chaotic centralization" characterized by "winners and losers" (7, 14).

THE NORMATIVE IDEAL

I have described how Christie's critical target is not "schooling" as such but rather "schools." In a parallel sense, the core of the normative strand in his work is not an ideal of "the school" or indeed "education." For while we are accustomed to reading devastating sociological critiques of schooling or state education, there are also many arguments by philosophers or theorists of education that defend an ideal of the school or education. Again, this is not Christie's approach.

Christie is not searching for or articulating some essence of the school qua school—a project that has received

considerable philosophical attention in recent years, notably in the work of Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons. In their book, *In Defence of the School: A Public Issue*, Masschelein and Simons (2012, 36) are concerned to defend “the school” as a distinct social institution, which they see as characterized by its essential mode of “suspension”—a notion that “not only implies the temporary interruption of (past and future) time, but also the removal of expectations, requirements, roles and duties connected to a given space.” This approach, it seems to me, is significantly different from that of Christie, who far from delighting in what makes “the school” distinct as an institutional form, is concerned to make the point that whatever it is that schools are doing, they will not be good places for children to be if they fail to respond to the conditions of social life within the communities where they are situated. Some recent work in the field of social justice education could be seen as taking a similar approach (see, e.g., Paris and Alim 2017). On Christie’s view, schools can be organic elements of society, and not, in Masschelein and Simons’s (2012, 36) phrase, a “pure medium or middle” set apart from it.

In this respect, Christie’s account resonates with Dewey’s (1907, 21) view that most of the problems plaguing schools are a result of “an inability to appreciate the social environment that we live in.” In fact, the following passage, from Christie’s text, could almost have been taken from Dewey: “We must therefore, to a much greater extent, begin to view our schools as social communities. Schools can and must do more than prepare and qualify students for the life that lies ahead of them. Schools *are in their own right* an essential part of life.” In contrast to Masschelein and Simons’s emphasis on

“the scholastic” and “study,” Christie insists that “the public school must first and foremost be a place to be, before it is a place to learn.”

In arguing that “the challenge facing the school must therefore be to offer the option of participation—and hereby opportunities to find meaning—within a social system in which ordinary life is represented to the greatest possible extent,” Christie is clearly articulating a view close to that of Ward. In his collection of seminars titled *Talking Schools*, Ward (1995, 107, 106) describes schools “not [as] a special place, but simply a particular user of every public space,” where “the daily lives of the community and its children are inextricably mixed, just as they were for most people all through history.” Ward contrasted this view with the way in which schools have become, in the modern world, “separate and segregated ghettos” (106).

Like Masschelein and Simons, other contemporary philosophers of education have articulated and defended accounts of “education as a practice in its own right,” arguing, like Pádraig Hogan (2011), that the inherent values and virtues of education are obscured by the suggestion that educational values must be derived from “particular individuals and groups.” For Christie, in contrast, as for most radical education theorists, it makes no sense to articulate the aims or values of any educational practice independently of those of the social setting in which it is taking place.

Work in the philosophy of education over the past fifty years in fact abounds with discussions of “the aims of education” (see White 1982; Marples 1999). This approach reflects a way of thinking about education that is entirely alien to that of Christie, who is not interested in articulating, much

less defending, a normative view of what education, or good education, should look like.

This perspective is most evident in the fifth chapter, “A Different School.” Rather than focusing on a single line of argument—for example, social inequality, critical thinking, genuine learning, or children’s freedom—Christie offers here an important warning against the lure of educational ideals—“the small school” or “free school”—and totalizing systems. For as he says, “‘Open schools’ may be open for both good and evil.”

None of this is to suggest that Christie is shying away from the idea that we need to consider the purpose of schools in contemporary society. Like John White (1982, 1990), whose work has focused on the attempt to articulate and defend the aims of a national curriculum in a liberal state, Christie warns against the danger of assuming that questions about any such “aims” have been settled. White has analyzed how academic subjects became part of the curriculum of state schools for historical and political reasons (see White 2006; Reiss and White 2013). Christie’s remarks on how “school subjects are chosen because they have been chosen before, and because we have teachers educated in these subjects to serve as instructors,” are almost identical to Reiss and White’s (2013, 1) argument that “a subject-led curriculum, especially at secondary level, starts with, and so is necessarily constrained by, the availability of teachers capable of teaching certain subjects.” Yet while Christie insists that any discussion about what schools should be doing should be informed by an “analysis of the actual needs of our children today,” unlike White, he seems skeptical of the idea that such an analysis will and should lead to the formulation of

a coherent set of specific aims for all schools, “derived” from an aims-led curriculum based on an account of human flourishing. Christie was clearly far more open to the idea that different communities and schools should be able to determine their own curricula—a position that has been explicitly rejected by White (2004, 20), who defends the idea of “putting aims and curricula—at a macro level—under political rather than professional control” as part of the aim of fostering a democratic society.

If there is any substantive moral and political orientation informing Christie’s work, it does seem to be a version of communitarianism. His discussion emphasizes, time and time again, the importance of collaborative social engagement as crucial to both individual and social flourishing. Human beings, he reminds us, in defending the need for parents and children to be involved in the governance and content of their schools, “do not gather voluntarily unless they have something to give or there is some benefit to be derived from their being together.” He quotes approvingly George Homans’s (1951, 72) work, which “illustrates how communal life dissipates as decision-making capacities are removed from the municipality,” again echoing Dewey’s (1907, 28) view that “a society is a number of people held together because they are working along common lines, in a common spirit, and with reference to common aim.”

Yet while Christie’s analysis echoes Dewey’s (1916, 96) defense of the school as a democratic community, or “form of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience,” he goes further than Dewey in arguing that “if the school is to nurture cooperation, it must be granted dominion over

its own life. ... The main issue is to establish a situation—a system—where all important decisions are made within, or in close proximity to, each individual school.” This analysis can be read as aligned with contemporary critiques of neo-liberal state education, and Christie would probably have been enthusiastic about recent initiatives toward greater local control and democratic governance of schools, such as the Porto Alegre experiment (see Gandin and Apple 2002). There is no doubt that some of the features of top-down state schooling systems that Christie was critical of have intensified in the era of advanced global capitalism and neo-liberal education policy, where, as critics such as Stephen Ball (2016, 1046) have analyzed, “management is altering social connections and power relations to less democratic and caring forms.” In light of these reforms, critics like Ball (2016, 1046) have called on teachers to “become increasingly critically reflexive, politically aware and ... reawaken to their real educational work—the ethical and moral project that most signed up to but which has since become lost.”

While the breaking up of the state system has led, as researchers have demonstrated, not to more local democratic control but instead often to projects of more top-down control by distant corporate entities, many such critics have defended state-funded education as a public good against an agenda of increasing privatization and marketization (see Ball 2013; Fielding and Moss 2011).

Christie, while sharing the more expansive notion of “public” education articulated by some writers in this field (see, e.g., Lawson and Spours 2011), was clearly suspicious of any centralizing educational agenda on the part of the state:

“If our mission is to create a thriving school community of cooperating individuals,” he argued, “the first requirement must be to do away with the system’s structure of a giant stepladder with a control center dictating activities from above.”

As mentioned earlier, Christie evidently shares some of Illich’s ideas about conviviality. The authors (Lomell and Halvorsen 2015, 143) of an obituary and review of his work note that Christie’s communitarian position was first expressed “in a rather rudimentary form in ‘Conflict as Property,’” and reflected later in his criminology work, where he discussed criminalization and levels of crime in the context of societies that had developed “from closely knit entities, characterized by primary control embedded in interactions between identifiable persons, to the urban cities of late modernity, characterized by secondary control of countless interactions between strangers.”

Interestingly, David Hargreaves (1994, 9), author of the famous 1967 “Lumley” study that Christie quotes (see Hargreaves 1967), expressed something close to Christie’s experimentalism in a much later piece of writing:

Utopian social engineering—defining an ideal, such as comprehensive schooling or market mechanisms, and then sticking fast to a national blueprint to achieve an ideal—will no longer do. We have had 30 years of it in education and it has not worked well. We need a large dose of what Karl Popper calls the piecemeal approach to reform—detecting weaknesses and failures and then undertaking the necessary experiments and re-adjustments to set things right.

Although Popper’s characterization of utopianism is highly problematic (see Webb 2013), Christie’s approach

does in fact reflect a similar resistance to the idea of utopian engineering. Far from being antiutopian, though, this approach is utopian in the sense reflected in the work of Ward and Goodman, whose anarchist and utopian orientation was expressed in the importance they attached to “exercising agency in immediate temporal and spatial contexts,” and formulating “a political approach that values proximity not only in relation to the temporal context but also the material environments of life” (Honeywell 2007, 240). Christie’s book exemplifies both the utopian hope and belief in substantive visions of a better society, and the anarchist view that “there is no final struggle, only a number of partisan struggles on a variety of fronts” (Ward 1995, 26). For if, as Christie argues, schools are not just mirrors of society, “it seems only reasonable to attempt to promote change on several fronts at the same time.”

Likewise, Christie clearly shares the social anarchist faith that “given a common need, a collection of people will, by trial and error, by improvisation and experiment, evolve order out of the situation—this order being more durable and more closely related to their needs than any kind of externally imposed authority could provide” (Ward 1973, 31). This view, alongside the Deweyan insistence on schools as aspects of community life, is captured in Christie’s words: “a wealth of experience demonstrates that most people manage to find a way to function if they need to, if they are left to their own devices. In such instances, the search in its own right for this way of functioning would become one of the main purposes of school—that is, learning to function as a community through life experience.”

PRACTICAL PROPOSALS

Christie's insistence on the need for schools to become more fully integrated in, rather than set apart from, contemporary society includes valuable concrete proposals for how this could work. He argues persuasively that "the more schools become places for authentic engagement with important elements of the surrounding world, the more this surrounding world would be invited to engage," and observes that in their endeavor to find tasks through which to enact this engagement, schools "probably won't have to look very far." Lamenting the "grotesque [situation] that nursing homes and schools [can be] located across the street from each other," without engaging with each other, he suggests that schools could get pupils to help with the care work, thereby creating "meaningful tasks" for them.

Interestingly, such proposals have been made and tried in various places, as a recent article in the *Guardian* describes. Yet such initiatives, it seems, are driven less by a belief in "a mode of existence in which the societal nature of schools has permeated our local communities that, having opened up to life, will no longer need special schemes to store their children somewhere separate from the society of which they are part" than by an attempt to address the major social problem of how to care for the elderly—a group of people who, like children, have apparently become a category to be dealt with and "stowed away" (Sheppard 2017).

To the extent that Christie, in 1971, was envisaging a future for society and education, he seemed fairly optimistic. Predicting that "the number of manual tasks to be done is on the decline," he noted that this would "increase surplus

and uselessness—but it will help shift the attention to other people and away from things”; in this context, if schools can “educate students in how to *be together with other people*,” this would instill “hope.”

This is different from the utopian vision of the future offered by recent critics and postcapitalist theorists, who predict how the inevitable growth of population surplus to the requirements of global capitalism and rapid development of technology will render human workers redundant.

On the basis of such an analysis, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have proposed a manifesto, demanding full automation, reduction of the working week, provision of a basic income, and diminishment of the work ethic, replacing the aspiration to full employment with a call for full unemployment. Although it is notable that unlike Christie, Srnicek and Williams (2016, 141) do not even mention children, they refer to education, within this analysis, as “a key institution for transforming neoliberal hegemony.”

Christie’s remarks may suggest a similar analysis of a post-capitalist future, but his corresponding view of the role of schools in society is far removed from this utopian vision. To the extent that Christie is a utopian thinker, he is so in a sense far closer to Myrna Breitbart’s (2014, 182) description of Ward as a “non-utopian utopian.” In fact, Christie’s optimism, perhaps strangely, bears similarities with the view expressed by David Blacker, a contemporary theorist who offers a bleak analysis of the inevitable futility of the institution of state schooling under advanced capitalism, where the growth of surplus populations will consign millions to the ranks of the precariat. In the face of this analysis, he does not advocate an alternative utopian hegemony. What is more,

Blacker (2013, 224) dismisses left-wing visions of education activism aimed at social justice as “both futile and a misallocation of attention and energy.”

Christie’s work transcends the choice, presented by Srnicek and Williams, between large-scale reform versus “horizontalism” as well as avoiding an escapist route into Blacker’s “islands of hope.” His text, in fact, is performing an important educational function similar to the work of anarchist thinkers like Goodman and Ward, who, as Breitbart (2014, 181) notes, attached great value to “drawing our attention to the possibilities for social and environmental change *already present* in people and their everyday environments.”

In the epilogue, Christie describes a particular educational community that, in his view, illustrates a way of learning and living together that in being “beneficial for ‘special’ people, ... will also be so good for everyone else.” As Ward (1995, 106) noted, “It requires an immense effort to insert a school in to the fabric of a community.” As an educator as well as a theorist, one of the valuable things that Christie did was to take his pupils to see and experience such a school for themselves. Having concluded that if this book has value today, it is in calling us to look more critically, but also less cynically and more carefully, at some of the ordinary and also extraordinary schools around us, I decided to heed Christie’s call. Remarkably, when I looked up the Camphill movement, to which the school that he described in 1971 belongs, it turned out that there are several such centers in England. One is about a forty-minute drive from my home. I emailed to ask if I could go and visit, and received a polite reply from the administrator. The center had an open day in June, she informed me, and I was welcome to come then. In Norway in

the 1970s, Christie could apparently just “take his students” to such schools to spend time with the pupils and teachers in the community, and get a sense of their everyday life, rather than being given a tour on an open day. So perhaps for people in 1970s’ Norway, the idea of schools as organic elements of their community sounded less radical. Yet even in England in 2020, there are many schools, teachers, and children trying together to create “a place to be, before it is a place to learn.”

Christie’s text can play an important role in offering us a reminder of the need to look properly at such places and consider their value. In an age when we are surrounded by totalizing visions of how we can fix social and individual problems through education, and cynical narratives about how pointless it is to try, recognizing such value may be possible only if we acknowledge, with Christie, that “we must recognize that we, along with our schools, are works in progress.”

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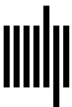
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