

## Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools & Working Class Culture, 1780-1850

Thomas Walter Laqueur. *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools & Working Class Culture, 1780-1850*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976. Pp. 294. \$22.50.

There are few areas in English social history more neglected than that concerning the education of the poor during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. M. G. Jones' classic, *The Charity School Movement*,<sup>1</sup> which is concerned almost exclusively with the eighteenth century, must still be regarded as the standard source, although it is now some forty years old. Not only have Jones' interpretation and findings gone virtually unchallenged; they have exerted a marked influence on subsequent histories of the education of the poor, even those whose authors, like E. P. Thompson and B. Simon, have obvious working class sympathies.

Implicit throughout Jones' work is a particular definition of charity schooling, that is, of the experiences provided children in the charity schools, schools of industry and, at the end of the eighteenth century, the Sunday schools. She views these institutions as agencies of indoctrination, financed and controlled by one social group (the middle classes) in order to improve and render more loyal, more industrious, more deferential and more religious another social group (the poor). The character of the education provided in charity schools is thus determined not by the social class receiving it, but rather by another class whose interests are not necessarily identical and perhaps even antithetical to those of the recipients. Thus, the first charity school movement in the early years of the eighteenth century is viewed primarily as a response by the propertied classes to the threat of life, liberty and religion posed by Jacobinism. In turn, the Sunday school movement at the end of the century is treated as a conscious attempt of the middle classes to prevent the spread of Jacobinism and the associated threats of violent political revolution and loss of private property. In neither case are religious motives alone seen as sufficient to explain the enthusiasm generated among the supporters; in neither case are the poor viewed as anything more than relatively passive recipients of what was offered.

There are, of course, good grounds for arguing along these lines, particularly since almost all the available contemporary sources were written by members of the middle classes. Consider, for example, the many letters concerning Sunday Schools published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* during the late 1780's and 90's.<sup>2</sup> Of the 42 letters published on the subject, no less than 36 argue that the major reason for supporting Sunday Schools is the increased social control gained over a potentially dangerous segment of society. Four letters give support on purely religious grounds and only two on what might be termed "educational" grounds. Sunday schools, it was believed, "will not fail under Divine Blessing, to teach that 'fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom; and to steadily inculcate the duties of sobriety, industry, temperance, and subordination . . .'"<sup>3</sup>

The implications of such an interpretation are several. First, the education provided by Sunday Schools has been treated as something which has been "done to" people rather than actively participated in. Second, the middle and upper classes have been viewed as active, controlling and exploitative in establishing educational facilities for the poor. Finally, the poor themselves, at least those participating in formal education, have been seen, if not as the actual victims of a plot, at least as accommodating and lacking both in class consciousness and initiative.

Of course, those familiar with the period and the sources are well aware that at the turn of the century the poor were anything but passive, accepting or even grateful for the educational largesse of their betters. For example, the More sisters did not always "get their way" with the villagers they were attempting to help and improve. Thus Martha More, in her *Mendip Annals*, relates with some disapproval the insistence of the villagers of Nailsea that they themselves select the teacher for the sisters' school; significantly, she

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<sup>1</sup>M. G. Jones, *The Charity School Movement in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1938).

<sup>2</sup>See D. Mustard, "The Motives of the Originators, Promoters and Supporters of Sunday Schools, 1780-1805," unpublished paper, Department of Educational Foundations, University of Alberta.

<sup>3</sup>"Report to the General Meeting of the Sunday School Society," 1795, quoted in *The Gentleman's Magazine* 2 (1795): 785.

was forced to admit that the young collier chosen proved to be one of the best teachers in the Mendip operation.<sup>4</sup> Even the redoubtable Mrs. Trimmer found herself on occasion treated with something less than polite deference by the parents of the children attending her school at Brentford. But such anecdotes, rather than casting doubt on the view that the middle class were in full control of things and successfully "working their way" with an unsuspecting working class, have tended to be considered as demonstrations of the rarity and atypicality of such attitudes and abilities.

To challenge such deep seated assumptions and approaches required not only painstaking research into sources at a local "grass roots" level; more importantly, it needed an act of what Collingwood would have referred to as "historical imagination." Fortunately for our understanding of the education of the poor in the 19th century, both the research and the act have been accomplished. The result is Laqueur's *Religion and Respectability*, which will surely become not only the standard work on the subject but provide a much needed fresh focus to subsequent research.

Laqueur argues, in summary form, that the Sunday School, particularly in the 19th century, was not so much an agency of middle class cultural imperialism as the "creation of the working class community" itself (p. 241). "The bourgeois world view," Laqueur believes, "triumphed in the 19th century largely through consent, not through force"; nor, he might have added, through some kind of middle class plot or process of indoctrination.

His case is argued and documented with meticulous attention to detail. It begins with a brief and somewhat conventional description of the ideational background to the Sunday School movement. There follows a detailed account of the origins and growth of the Sunday School movement, which includes an important section analyzing significant regional variations in its strength. There can be no doubt, Laqueur concludes, that despite considerable regional diversity, very few working class children escaped some exposure to the Sunday School. Moreover, even at the outset of the movement, Sunday Schools were created from within working class communities, not imposed on them from without.

The assertion that the Sunday School was an integral part of the community it served is elaborated in considerable detail in his chapter "The Sunday School: A Portrait in Context." Laqueur argues, convincingly in my view, that "the Sunday School was a relatively autonomous largely working class institution" (p. 63). It was autonomous in two important senses; one, that it had an identity and interests clearly distinct from the local church or chapel, and two, that its management was "highly structured and generally democratic" (p. 65). It is true, he admits, that in the early days of the movement, in the 1780's and 1790's, the Sunday Schools were operated by the rich in order to "improve" the poor. But they quickly "ceased being public charities and became the province of energetic and committed men and women of the local congregation or neighbourhood" (p. 74). A carefully conducted analysis of the social composition of students, teachers and managers adds further weight to the conclusion that the Sunday Schools were, in fact, "schools of the people."

It must not be supposed, however, that working class control of Sunday Schools was accompanied by any overt rejection of what are rather unsatisfactorily called "middle class values." As the central chapters of the book (chapters 4, 5 and 6) show, the goals and curricular content of the schools were in no way antithetical to the spirit of nineteenth century bourgeois society. Virtues such as thrift, industry, punctuality, cleanliness and, above all, literacy were not the prerogative of any one class (or religious sect for that matter), attempting to impose them on a reluctant and innocent working class. Controlled from within the community by individuals of the same social class as the pupils' parents, the Sunday School was not only able to make a significant contribution to the nineteenth century drive towards mass literacy; it provided, as well, social and recreational services and a training ground for working class leadership in popular politics.

It is clear then, argues Laqueur in his final chapter, that the "social control" interpretation of Sunday Schools must be reconsidered. Indeed, he seems to suggest that a simple 'social class conflict' approach to the phenomenon of mass education must inevitably be misleading.

The great divisions in early nineteenth century society [he writes] were not between the middle and the working classes but between the idle and the non-idle classes, between the rough and the respectable, between the religious and the non-religious. All of these divisions ran across class lines. The puritan ethic was therefore not the monopoly of the owners of capital; it was the ideology of those who worked as

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<sup>4</sup>Martha More (ed. William Roberts), *The Mendip Annals, The Journal of Martha More* (London: James Nisbett & Co., 1859), p. 178.

against those who did not. Sunday schools were effective in the transmission of certain values precisely because these values were those of the working-class men and women who taught in and supported the schools.<sup>3</sup> (P. 239).

Such a statement is obviously calculated to provoke reaction from those who adopt a class conflict approach to the history of nineteenth century England, and particularly to its educational developments. It is certainly true that the stratification of educational opportunities and facilities along clearly defined lines of social class proceeded apace in the nineteenth century. Laqueur does not offer any challenge to this position; indeed, that the Sunday School was a "class" institution is central to his argument. What is new is the insistence that the Sunday School was a working class institution in the sense that its goals and curriculum were determined and controlled by working class people themselves. Laqueur's approach, while it opens up important new lines of inquiry, is thus still "sociological" and adopts an essentially "structural-functionalist" explanatory model.

If Laqueur's conclusions are correct, what then are we to make of Thompson's claim that the Sunday Schools practiced "direct indoctrination," "psychological atrocities," "religious terrorism," "emotional bullying," and were imbued with the 'pitiless ideology of work'? The answer is that, within the framework established by Laqueur, we can make nothing of them, for they are not judgments which can be made in a neat and orderly "structural-functionalist" world. In examining the Sunday Schools, Laqueur's approach is entirely along the lines of social class; Thompson, on the other hand, views them in the light not only of class conflict, but of generational conflict. For him it was not so much the working class that were psychically exploited, as its children. As far as they were concerned, it made little difference whether they were indoctrinated by pious, respectable and industrious members of the middle class or of the working class. There is thus in Thompson's work, alongside the obvious ideological commitment to some form of Marxist world view, an element of humanity and compassion towards children which is notably absent in Laqueur's book.

The "sociological" interpretation is useful in allowing us to see clearly the complex relationships between various "objective" phenomena in a developing social situation; it does little, however, to enable us to grasp and understand the experiences of the actors themselves. Love, generosity, gentleness and caring together with eccentricity, indifference, greed and cruelty, all were plentifully in evidence in the Sunday Schools. Neither their presence nor their possible effects on the lives of children are explored in Laqueur's account. Indeed, the whole dimension of personality development and its relationship to childhood experiences seems to have no relevance in his scheme of things.

Ironically, it is the essential superficiality, that is the concern with social phenomena at a surface or behavioural level, of the sociological approach which gives Laqueur's book an authority and decisiveness that is all too rare in the field of history of education. One may be disappointed at the dimensions of the experience of Sunday schooling not dealt with by Laqueur; but of the value and seminal importance of *Religion and Respectability* there can be no doubt.

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<sup>3</sup>E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 412-416.