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The New Slavery, or Chrysalization of Class

*The negro slaves of the South are the happiest, and, in some sense, the freest people in the world...They enjoy liberty, because they are oppressed neither by care nor labor.*¹

— George Fitzhugh, 1857

This paper shows that emergence of modern childhood can be explained by a need to secure unpaid labor of school-aged children by means of extra-economic coercion. The pre-modern Europe needed to compel a growing segment of population to participate in unpaid work of schooling. The task was accomplished by creating a group with limited rights, and by convincing everyone that the labor of schooling is actually a kind of service provided to children. Ultimately, the modern conception of childhood was born of power relations formed by economic necessity. To support the claim, I rely mainly on Philippe Ariès's account. Michel Foucault and Karl Marx provided ways of thinking about mechanics of power.

Ariès and his thesis

Before we can proceed, a disclaimer on Ariès: the main thesis of his *Centuries of Childhood* is overstated. “No doubt, —writes Ariès,—the discovery of childhood began in the thirteenth century, and its progress has can be traced in history of art in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.”² The “no doubt” clause usually appears in weaker arguments. It is very unlikely that after the collapse of Antiquity Europeans have forgotten what children are. Of all available ethnographic data, age grouping is probably the most commonly cited phenomenon; why European societies should be an exception? Some of Ariès's evidence is dubious, too. For example, he thinks that medieval artists failed to perceive distinct physical features of children, and depicted them as smaller adults. This, of course, can be better explained with period-specific aesthetic ideals than with failure to perceive children as different from adults. Linda Pollock undertook careful analysis of Ariès and other historians who share the conviction that childhood did not exist before the 17th century. She finds that actual practices of child rearing changed very little between 16th and 19th centuries, and that Ariès' sources and methods are suspect.³ Yet Ariès is not a historian in the traditional sense; rather, he is a thinker like Foucault, if of a smaller caliber. His analytic descriptions overshadow his conclusions.

Here is how to save Ariès' thesis from its author. Almost any way of grouping people may or may not be used in power relations. Such things as race or ethnicity, or religion can fluctuate from being relatively unimportant, to taking a central stage in power matters. Other distinctions such as gender, are always important, but can be used differently to project power. Some differences do have biological basis (gender, race, possibly sexual orientation), while others are completely culturally based (caste, lineage, religion, ethnicity, class). In the former case, people can always tell the difference between, a man and a woman, or dark skin versus light skin, but making those distinctions significant is a feature of a given society's power technology. Childhood is one of such categories, loosely based on biology, but utilized in a specific form of a power relationship. Europeans, like all humans, have always known that children are developmentally different from adults. What Ariès describes is a reinvention rather than an invention of childhood.

Reinvention of childhood

Although Ariès does not explain *why* childhood needed reinventing, he demonstrates several means by which childhood was redefined in the European societies at the end of the Middle Ages. Among these means are:

1. Distinctive dress; segregation from adults in play and work;
2. Exaggeration of children's immaturity;
3. The idea of childhood innocence that needs to be preserved;
4. Linking schooling to biological age;

5. Stripping students of political self-governance and withdrawal of many previously existing rights;
6. Corporal punishment and intrusive supervision.

History of childhood resembles formation of subjugated groups, such as lower classes, women, the non-European races, etc. The same legal and cultural mechanisms, same rhetorical techniques, same ideological moves were employed. Moreover, children were systematically linked to and compared with such groups already subjugated.

Ariès traces the appearance of a special uniform to set children aside from adults. “Every social nuance had its corresponding sign in clothing. At the end of the sixteenth century, custom dictated that childhood, henceforth recognized as a separate entity, should also have its special costume.” Ariès notes that “boys were the first specialized children;”⁴ their dress was made distinct much sooner, perhaps because boys began going to school in large numbers in the late sixteenth century. Three elements separated a middle class boy’s dress from that of an adult: it was archaic, effeminized, and reminiscent of lower classes. The symbolism here is quite clear. Children were symbolically linked to the old, backwards times, and to old, feeble people. Boys were made look like girls, a reference to another dominated group. Finally, the link to the lower class invoked imagery of subordination. Sailor’s suits, short pants, militaristic uniforms—all of these invited patterns of subordination to not just adult authority, but authority of adult institutions such as school. Interestingly, the children’s dress fashions did not penetrate the lower classes: “They kept up the old way of life which made no distinction between children and adults, in dress or in work or in play.”⁵ This happened because lower class kids did not go to school, so there was no need to subjugate them beyond already available class and social status domination.

In the middle of the fifteenth century, certain aristocrats had funded houses (colleges) at the University of Paris for poor students. Soon after, well-to-do families started to send their own offspring to the colleges, because of their stricter discipline. Ariès comments:

“Thus with the institution of the college appeared a feeling unknown to the Middle Ages and which would grow in strength until the end of the nineteenth century: revulsion at the idea of mingling of the ages. Henceforth schoolboys would tend to be separated from adults and submitted to a discipline peculiar to their position, for the good reputation of the poor scholars was chiefly due to their ‘confinement’ (*réclusion*).”⁶

Now, confinement and strict discipline served one main purpose; to make the boys study harder. Efficiency gains in school labor come from stricter discipline, which in turn, means shortening of free time, and increase of on-task time. This is still the main way to gain productivity of school learning; it is not better teaching methods or better curriculum. The latter has to do with the specifics of learning: unlike any other labor, its efficiency is directly linked to effort, and such labor cannot be significantly automated or divided. The link to biological age is a successful attempt to confine the labor of schooling to a specific, easily identifiable group. Just as racial slavery is a more efficient way of domination, equating childhood with studenthood uses a preexisting marker to define a newly conceptualized group.

Next, introduction of a simple assumption that children are not supposed to have sexual desire or violent impulses, creates a whole class of young deviants, and helps keeping the rest of children in check. Ariès writes (approvingly, I must note) that towards the end of the sixteenth century, “certain pedagogues ... refused to allow children to be given indecent books any longer. The idea originated of providing expurgated editions of the classics for the use of children. This was a very important stage, which maybe regarded as marking the beginning of respect for childhood.”⁷ This passage shows Ariès’ belief that all the changes in the status of childhood he believes to be ultimately positive, liberating children from indecency and delivering them to the arms of educators. Women constitute another class whose submission was assured by the presumption of innocence. If women and children as groups are *by nature* asexual and peaceful, then one has to make sure each individual child and woman are made to comply with their “nature” by any means necessary. The idea of keeping children ignorant of sexual matters is a sophisticated way of control. If we assume that children are not supposed to have sexual (or any other bodily) desires, any manifestations of such will serve as evidence of their corruption, and therefore justify their dependency on adult authority. The same line of reasoning was later extended to older children, when G. Stanley Hall

invented the notion of adolescence.⁸ The obsession with youth sexuality is stronger now than ever before: various abstinence movements, sex education, teacher-student sex scandals; all drive home the same point: young people need supervision, because otherwise they might develop wrong desires. And if their desires look exactly like ours, well, they are young and therefore must not have those desires. Of course, the adult desire itself have been shaped, as Foucault has shown, and the denial of children's desire was a part of the larger process.

Linked to innocence, was the idea of immaturity: "the better to distinguish schoolboys from adults, it were necessary to exaggerate the puerility of their characters, even of the oldest among them."⁹ The presumption of immaturity (puerility) is the basic justification for limiting children's rights, including compulsory education, and denial of electoral, property, and personal rights. There is a reason to believe that immaturity is not only greatly exaggerated, but is specifically trained, created. Consider classic experiments of Jean Piaget. He has shown that young children's cognition is egocentric: they cannot comprehend conservation of volume; they believe that a taller glass has more liquid than the shorter, even though they witness liquid transfer from a shorter but wider glass in a narrower but taller one. McGarrigle and Donaldson have demonstrated that children may react to the expectations of the adult conducting experiment, while they actually understand the conservation laws.¹⁰ In general, children's immaturity may be as much a result of social expectations as it is a result of their innate limitations.

The emergence of childhood also had all the signs of political struggle. Ariès describes in detail that until the end of Middle Ages, student life was governed by "traditional customs of comradeship and self-government."¹¹ Yet as early as fifteenth century, ecclesiastic and civil authorities systematically sought to strip the student societies of self-governance. This was not met with indifference, but resulted in spectacular, sometimes armed confrontations between students and school officials. Eventually, a new system of discipline gradually emerged. "This system was distinguished by three principal characteristics: constant supervision, informing raised to the level of an institution and a principle of government, and the extended application of corporal punishment."¹² Corporal punishment, virtually unheard of till the end of fourteenth century, has become common and brutal. Initially applied only to the youngest and the poorest of students, by the sixteenth century, corporal punishment has become ubiquitous. In the adult world, being subjected to corporal punishment was a marker of lower class; students of all classes suffered from humiliating public beatings.¹³ "The concept of the separate nature of childhood was, of its difference from the world of adults, began with the elementary concept of its weakness, which brought it down to the lowest social strata."¹⁴

In the second half of the eighteenth century, French colleges (but not English schools) have largely abandoned both corporal punishment and the use of student informants. It was not so much a sign of liberation, as an advent of a more militaristic model of discipline. After Napoleon I, French schools resembled barracks more than a cloister. Ariès believes that this development indicated the birth of adolescence. "This notion of adolescence was to bring about a major transformation of education: the pedagogues henceforth attributed a moral value to uniform and discipline."¹⁵ The militarization of schooling could be viewed as replacement of compulsion mechanism. Schooling was equated with service and sacrifice. The ethics of toughness and heroism is nothing but a labor extraction mechanism, and ideology justifying unpaid labor. "The correlation of the adolescent and the soldier, in school, resulted in an emphasis on characteristics such as toughness and virility which had hitherto been neglected and which henceforth were valued for themselves."¹⁶

"The solicitude of family, Church, moralists and administrators deprived the child of the freedom he had hitherto enjoyed among adults. It inflicted on him the birch, the prison cell—in a word, the punishments usually reserved for convicts from the lowest strata of society. But this severity was the expression of a very different feeling from the old indifference: an obsessive love which was to dominate society from the eighteenth century on."¹⁷ Well, obsessive love is a form of domination, a particular way of channeling the affective currents to forge dependency, and to achieve compliance. One of the ultimate tests of such compliance is submission to schooling.

School children as class

Ariès sees a clear connection between childhood and schooling, but does not explain the causes for the gradual emergence of the new childhood. He claims that children have become relatively much more important; therefore, adults paid more attention to them, and invested in their education. Ariès remains prisoner of an assumption that education in general and schooling in particular benefits mostly its bearer, so learning is self-enriching and self-fulfilling work. I would argue that the very notion of education as self-enriching, or as a vehicle of upward social mobility was an ideology imposed on children to ensure their compliance with the society's demands. In general, when someone tells me something is very good for me, I always wonder why such a good thing needs selling.

The gradual emergence of the knowledge-intensive economy revealed one crucial bottleneck called education. Human knowledge became remarkably easy to transmit and accumulate; machines and division of labor has made most forms of labor infinitely more productive mostly *because* of the new ways of information processing. The cost of such a transition is that now many more people need to earn to use all this information. One crucial component of information-labor cycle has a nasty habit of dying, and taking all its knowledge to the grave. To combat this constant leak of knowledge, we have developed a huge industry that fills the new workers with knowledge and attitudes needed in the new economy. And learning is still extremely time consuming, labor-intensive, and impossible to specialize; it is an archaic kind of work characteristic of pre-industrial civilizations. By its very nature, learning is difficult, because the results are proportional to effort, so no machine will do much good. The drudgery has been leaving fields and factories only to reappear in schoolhouses. Such a shift has created a new social class of school-aged students.

Vladimir Lenin has provided the best Marxist definition of class for Marx himself had not done so:

Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it. Classes are groups of people one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy.¹⁸

The definition fits well. K-12 students are a group of people who work in a specific industry, performing a specialized form of labor. The society uses a number of legal and cultural devices to make sure students perform the required work. They are denied basic legal rights, and are treated by a separate legal system. The state exercises some ownership rights over the persons of children through extralegal provisions of school authority. The school-aged children cannot own property, and are legally barred from entering the existing free labor market (of course, for their own protection). This is to ensure that they perform only one form of labor: school learning. They are also required by law to attend school, and their parents are required to ensure such compliance by law. Their economic situation is similar to some other forms of non-free labor, such as indentured servants of colonial America or bonded laborers of the British Empire. However, children's legal condition is more similar to chattel slavery.¹⁹ Parents act like owners whose rights are regulated: children cannot be sold, but cannot practically be emancipated. The state also monitors humane treatment of children (which was also common in North American slavery). The parental authority over children more and more looks like it is delegated to parents by the state, which has an overriding interest in ensuring large and uninterrupted supply of student labor.

The phenomenon of non-free, or bonded labor is still common throughout the world. In the developed countries, it concentrates almost exclusively in one industry: K-12 schooling. Military conscripts, certain prisoners present other forms of labor secured outside of wage labor market. Moreover, contemporary labor market uses multiple ways of obtaining labor at significant discounts. Examples of such semi-free labor are both legal and illegal immigrants, women and minorities. Yet compulsory schooling dwarfs any other

forms of non-free labor by the number of workers employed and value produced by the industry: almost 1/5 of the American population are students.

The capitalist labor market have never been comprehensive, and always included large island of non-market based labor relations: the domestic labor of women, military service (both conscripted and voluntary), modern New World slavery, serfdom and other forms of bonded labor, and volunteerism. Although we may admire some institution on this list, and condemn others, this does not change the deep economic affinity of these forms of labor: they all require extra-economic mechanisms, because they all are unpaid or underpaid. In some cases, they depend on brutal force, in others—on gentle ideological coercion, and in most—on the force of law.

Crystalization

Ariès was confused by the apparent ambivalence of the emergence of childhood through schooling: it had all the signs of subjugation, and yet it apparently resulted in betterment for children. The medieval liberty afforded to children is appealing if a bit shocking to us, and yet their well-organized, disciplined modern status can be interpreted as a sign of general progress. From the very beginning, the formation of the new subjugated class has been disguised as an act of liberation. I would argue that such a disguise is strictly ideological, and does not alter the underlying relationship of economic exploitation. Children are another class of bound laborers, whose work benefit the state, and by extension, the public at large to a much greater extent than it benefits the individual. Now, the objections to my claim are obvious. What students are required to do seems to benefit them personally. How can school-related work be interpreted as exploitative if it so clearly benefits children themselves? After all, there is a direct link between the level of education and life-time income. Moreover, the demand for more education is common among all classes of our society, so even if children often do not want to learn, their parents clearly want them to attend school. Inequalities in educational opportunity are one of the strongest grievances of the lower classes and minorities.

A proper response to these objections would take me well beyond the limits of this paper. In essence, yes, income raises with years of schooling, but not in a straight line, and the line does not start at zero. Rather, it is a sharp curve. The difference in income between a high school graduate and a dropout is negligible. Just to land at the very bottom of economic ladder, one needs at least some high school. This means that the years of schooling almost up to high school are essentially worthless to the individual who will not continue on. Of course, these years are far from worthless to the employers, who get literate janitors and fast food workers without paying anything for it.

Traditional classes implied membership for life for overwhelming majority of their members. This feature was and still is the main cause of class struggle. Yet the contemporary knowledge-based capitalism has changed this assumption. Nothing in the notion of the class requires such vertical, along the life-span separation. The relationships of economic domination are distributed differently now. Throughout life span, many people now move from a dominated to dominant groups. I will call this phenomenon the chrysalization of class. In addition to traditional classes, the population can also be sliced horizontally. For the first few decades of human life, one has to be an economic chrysalis, compelled to perform hard and unpaid labor. Later in life, a significant part of population will migrate into a more prosperous position; some will also reach retirement age and won't have to work at all. The purpose of the class division is still the same: to extract labor. Yet the new chrysalized class structure has none of the ills of the struggle. An individual is put into a position where she exploits her younger self.

Human life looks genuinely different from different vantage points; the diversity of ages cannot be reduced to a strict hierarchy. What is an economic interest of a child? We often assume that it is the same as one of the “potential adult” contained in the child. Indeed, from an adult's point of view, working hard in school is a great choice. However, this is hindsight wisdom. There is a logical jump here: “Because you will thank me in the future, I can force you to do something now.” Yet your future thankfulness is a direct result of my present use of force, so it is a case of self-fulfilling prophecy. Does the future anticipated result justify today's denial of rights? If yes, to what extent?

The discussion on intergenerational justice, initiated by Rawls,²⁰ brings forth the existence of certain ethical obligations to people of the future and of the past.²¹ The problem is, we do not have relationships of reciprocity with people who do not exist yet, and we do not know their identity (or what they would want). While there is a strong claim in favor of inter-generational justice, it is limited, and is different from regular justice. Following a similar logic, we must acknowledge our obligations to the “potential adult,” yet such obligations are limited by the non-existence of such a being, and by our lack of knowledge of his or her preferences. At the very least, we have certain obligations to actual children that are separate from our obligations to potential adults. Our obligations to actual children must be governed by the general concepts of justice, which excludes forced labor. Children have a right to exercise their own judgment of what constitutes their benefit, which we may consider erroneous, but cannot deny on the basis of such a judgment. The principle of human identity is routinely overstated. A child is the same person as an adult – this is not an unqualified statement. They are in some respects, and not in some other respects. Therefore, we must allow existence of different interests, including economic interests.

Emancipation

Compulsory schooling has a problem much bigger than the contemporary reformers have in mind. Long-term prospects of the mass schooling are unsustainable. Just like the New World slavery, it can co-exist with the labor markets for a long time, but in the end, such a sector conflicts with the rest of the market-driven economy and the democratic state. Slavery had an absolute ceiling of productivity, and it constrained development of consumer market. In addition, the institution so clearly contradicted the democratic ideals that it became ideologically unsustainable. Compulsory schooling represents a sector of economy in many ways resembling American slavery. It is a large industry, thoroughly entangled in the rest of the social matrix, and our economy depends on it for survival. Even those few who appreciate antidemocratic, compulsory nature of schooling, believe schooling is like holding a wolf by its ears: you don't like it, but you don't dare let go. I suspect that we sing songs to virtues of education mostly out of economic necessity, not out of the instinct of justice. That was exactly the rationale for slavery.

Compulsory schooling has two essential, intrinsic, and unfixable problems. Economically, it relies on highly unmotivated compulsory labor of young conscripts. School learning is remarkably inefficient, and must remain so necessarily, because of the economic conditions in which students operate. Students produce massive economic value, excluded from regular market mechanisms of demand and supply. But because employers are not paying for this enormous value, they have no interest in making it more efficient. An enormous chunk of our GDP does not enter into national statistics, because school students perform countless hours of arduous and unpaid work. Like any other subsidized resource, cheap education created market deformations, and encourages waste. Employers keep encouraging tougher standards and longer duration of education, because even if school reform returns are negligible, they will still benefit by having a bit more educated workforce.

Ideologically and politically, the position of limited rights in which we placed students is also untenable. Despite the newest most scientific findings about the “adolescent brain,” eventual emancipation of youth is inevitable. Moreover, school learning will have to be included in free labor market. In other words, we would have to pay kids to study, and respect their wishes when they find a better employment. That is the long-term prospect.

The short-term prospect is to understand the economic nature of bonded labor, and improve the conditions of student. First, we would need to call schooling what it is—a form of national service students do for their country, not a great gift they receive. Those who give should get recognition, tangible benefits (for example, guaranteed health benefits tied to learning), and some voice in how schools operate. Those who decline to serve cannot be penalized; those who are willing to learn later in life must be afforded a real opportunity to do so. In addition to school work, schools must provide a variety of activities in which students are willing to participate voluntarily.

Notes

¹ George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters*, Electronic Edition, Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1998 (original publication 1857) p. 29-30.

² Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of childhood: a social history of family life*; translated from the French by Robert Baldick, New York : Vintage, c1962, 46

³ Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-child Relations from 1500 to 1900*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 268-269.

⁴ Ariès, 57.

⁵ Ariès, 61.

⁶ Ariès, 156.

⁷ Ariès, 109.

⁸ G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence; its psychology and its relations to physiology, anthropology, sociology, sex, crime, religion and education*, New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904.

⁹ Ariès, 164.

¹⁰ The description of the famous “naughty bear experiment is in J. McGarrigle and M. Donaldson, “Conservation Accidents,” *Cognition* 3, 1974, 341-350.

¹¹ Ariès, 253.

¹² Ariès, 254.

¹³ Ariès, 261

¹⁴ Ariès, 262.

¹⁵ Ariès, 267.

¹⁶ Ariès, 267.

¹⁷ Ariès, 413.

¹⁸ Vladimir Lenin, *A Great Beginning*, Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/jun/19.htm>

¹⁹ For legal evidence of such a claim, see: Bonina, Diane I., Bahe-Jachna, Ruth A., “The Treatment Of Children as Chattel in Recent Adoption Decisions,” *Human Rights: Journal of the Section of Individual Rights & Responsibilities*, 00468185, Spring 99, Vol. 26, Issue 2.

²⁰ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971.

²¹ I acknowledge an extensive use of the debate’s summary by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-intergenerational>.