

AFTERWORD

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I recently came across a fascinating online map, made by an Oxford economist. It showed the countries of the world shaded according to their level of education.

Countries whose people had little education were shaded a light green, while countries whose people had more education were shaded progressively darker into a deep, rich blue. Looking at the map, I was immediately struck by the way the colours divided across the globe, with the rich countries of the global North notably darker than their counterparts in the South.

Without using any words, this map tells a powerful moral tale that reaffirms our deepest prejudices: rich countries are more educated than poor countries, white people smarter than brown or black, and the vast majority of the global South remains mired in ignorance.

This is a profoundly misleading tale. If we look more closely, it turns out that the map is not about education at all, and certainly not about knowledge; rather, what it tells us is each country's average years of formal schooling, and that is a very different matter altogether. True, most people outside the West only spend a few years in school, but it would be absurd to assume that they are therefore uneducated or ignorant. Any anthropologist will tell you that even those who have never set foot in a school are often nonetheless learned, brilliant, and wise.

Take the farmers, for example, and their intimate knowledge of the seasons and the soils and the seeds – knowledge that could never be contained in a textbook or patented by Monsanto. Or take the fisherfolk, who understand the rivers and seas better than most professional geographers. And what about the herders, who know their livestock as intimately as kin, or the healers who guard botanical secrets about which pharmacists can only dream. And then there are the midwives, the mothers, the elders; there are the local historians and the street mechanics; there are the artists, the dancers, the bards, and musicians skilled in instruments we cannot even name.

Consider the education that of all this requires – 200,000 years of human knowledge, carefully transmitted from teachers to students, travelling across lands with no regard for borders, building from one generation to the next. Think of the vast richness of this legacy, bequeathed to us by educators most of whom never held a degree. It is to them that we owe our collective inheritance as a species.

These educators emerge in the photographs and stories that grace this book. We meet a circus master in Ethiopia and a wrestling coach in Senegal; a diving instructor in Italy and an animator in Ukraine. In Niger we encounter a teacher of music, in Dubai a crafter of boats, and in Botswana an aircraft mechanic – extraordinary figures who are driven by a passion to share their knowledge and skills with others. And everywhere we learn about people who are teaching those who have been excluded from the system – refugees, the elderly, and children in slums – stepping in of their own accord to cover where the state has failed.

What is so powerful about this book is that it completely inverts the one-dimensional, Eurocentric story told by that Oxford map. It explodes the formal definition of education and reminds us that the vast, vast majority of learning – one of the most fundamental of all human activities – takes place outside of state institutions. It reminds us that there are other stories out there – ones that we can find at the margins of the state, or in its cracks – where learning thrives in the mundane flow of everyday life.

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As I read through this book, I found myself reflecting on my own education. What comes to mind when we think of education? For most people, it is not the process of learning, nor the tug of curiosity. It is not the thrill of critical thought, or the sacred relationship between teacher and student. It is an institution: the school. I hated school when I was young, and I have met very few children who claim to enjoy it. How strange that children, whose sense of curiosity is insatiable, would be so repulsed by an institution that supposedly exists to facilitate learning.

Yet the sense of alienation that so many students feel is hardly surprising. After all, the French social theorist Michel Foucault famously pointed out that the “real” purpose of the school – at least in the context of the modern state – is not education, but discipline and control. In this sense, Foucault likened the school to that other key institution of state power, the prison.

According to Foucault, the school is designed to make sure we all come out trained to submit to authority, respond to performance incentives, internalise hierarchies, and observe the strictures of time – that we grow to think of ourselves as individuals who must compete with one another for success, and link our self-worth to grades and other extrinsic indicators. School instills in us desires and goals that are compatible with the objectives of the state and capitalism, and produces in us “safe” patterns of thought and behavior. It renders us docile and obedient, willing servants of the status quo.

Of course, school is not only about discipline. It is also about knowledge – history and geography, science and philosophy. Much of this knowledge is valuable in its own right, but it is also shot through with ideology. Knowledge is never neutral. Woven into the knowledge we receive in school is a grand narrative about the world: that the nation-state is superior to all other political systems, that capitalism is the only viable economic model, that humans can control nature through the power of science and reason, and above all that the whole world should “develop” toward these Western ways of being.

This is why schooling played such a central role in the process of colonisation. It was instrumental not only as a tactic of control, but as a way of getting the colonised to hate their own cultures and their indigenous forms of knowledge – to reject them as backwards and unsophisticated compared to the West.

Yet the ways of being that we have been made to embrace so uncritically are now leading us headlong into crisis. Our economic system, with its technological efficiency and its need for endless material growth, is at war with our environment. Our forests have been razed, our oceans are heaving with trash, and species are going extinct at a rate of 14,000 a year. Climate change is causing deserts to expand and the seas to rise. Food crops are failing as the seasons collapse and soils disintegrate. Even the United Nations warns that widespread famine looms on the horizon.

They tell us not to worry. We will be saved by the West’s superior knowledge, its advanced science and technology. But let’s not forget that these interlocking crises have been caused almost entirely by the very countries that are shaded dark blue on that map, the ones that claim to be so educated; not by those we denigrate as ignorant. Perhaps the formal, standardised model of education so revered by the powers that be is not the solution to our crisis, but a cause of it.

If we are to avoid the disasters that loom so large before us, we will have to unlearn much of what we have been taught in school. We will have to unlearn our habits of discipline and docility and recover the spirit of rebellion and resistance necessary to bend our trajectory away from the precipice. We will have to unlearn the myth of competitive individualism so that we can rebuild robust communities and share the resources and skills we need to thrive. We will have to unlearn our obsession with extrinsic success in order to slow down our relentless pursuit of consumption, profit, and growth.

We will need to shed our old narratives of progress and development, abandon our assumptions about what kinds of education “count”, and embrace other, multiple forms of learning and knowledge. We need a new science that recognises that humans are intimately interrelated with the rest of nature, not separate from and above it. We need a new economics that organises production and distribution according to principles of justice and sustainability rather than self-serving extraction and exploitation. We need a new politics that values real democracy and equality instead of state domination and hierarchy.

This is what the social critic Ivan Illich meant when he called for “deschooling society”. We need to deprogramme ourselves from the false assumptions that have so narrowed our imaginations.

All of this requires that we rid ourselves forever of the dangerous hubris of that Oxford map. It requires that we reach across the artificial chasm we have created and recognise the value of the knowledge that flourishes outside the system – the knowledge of the farmers and the healers, the fisherfolk and the midwives, the ones whose wisdom has allowed them to live in symbiosis with each other and their ecosystems for so long. If we do, we will find that they understand something about human existence on this fragile planet that we have forgotten – vital lessons that we must relearn if we are to survive. In the end, they will be our educators.