

An Underground History of American Education

John Taylor Gatto

John Taylor Gatto is a truly educated man, a rarity in the field of education.

Gatto is able to look at the American education enterprise from a universal perspective. He knows the intellectual history of the West well, and is able to trace the development of the concept of education through the centuries.

He is not the only one to do this. For a more mainstream treatment, see Diane Ravitch "Left Behind, a Century of Failed School Reform." Ravitch is at the Brookings Institution, in the heart of Washington, and is therefore taken as authoritative. It is refreshing to see Gatto, coming in from left field, rather directly out of the classroom, make pretty much the same observations about the great figures in the history of American education: Thorndike, Rugg, Cubberley, Conant,... too many to name. He also describes the education schools, notably Colombia, University of Chicago, Stanford and Harvard, which have dominated the discussion ever since they managed to make something which had always been considered an art, teaching technique, into an academic subject which would support endless PhD's and pompous academic publications.

Ravitch's latest book "The Death And Life Of The Great American School System" criticizes the effect of the recent Gazillionaires' (Bill Gates et al) philanthropy on modern education. Gatto analyzes the agendas of the first generation of great educational philanthropists: Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller among others. He says that their motives were to create good workers and consumers, not to advance intellectual inquiry. In fact, he concludes throughout, they set up systems to stifle independent intellectual endeavor and breed conformity. Moreover, they did it in a way that reinforced the Anglican social class structure which dated back to our country's founding.

Gatto describes his own intellectual journey, from a belief that the schools were simply misguided, and could be reformed, to the conviction that they are so thoroughly controlled by such a broad web of interests, among them the education schools, the teachers unions, various levels of government, and the teachers and administrators themselves, that it will never be unraveled. Gatto's own experience is illustrative. He was named teacher of the year in both New York City and New York State, but he was also run out of his teaching position by administrators who found him too original and difficult to deal with. The schools are a bureaucracy, and they serve the bureaucrats first. Educating your kid is incidental. Gatto was continually in trouble for trying to do that. Rather than beat your head against such an obdurate system, the only thing for a wise parent to do is to take charge of your children's education. Take them out!

I heartily agree. I sent three children through elite Episcopal schools, and served on the boards of both of them. After retiring I taught in several private schools. Gatto is absolutely right when he says that even the best of schools, there is no more than an hour of pure education delivered in any given day. Most of the time is spent moving the kids around, controlling them, and giving them busy work. Gatto

says they become bored and stultified because they are not intellectually challenged. In fact, when they tried to do something independent, it puts them out of step with the rest of the class and the whole power structure comes down on top of them. Rather than being a place of learning, which is something a student might do on his own, the school becomes a place of teaching, in which the powers that be, ultimately the teacher, decides what, when and how much learning is going to go on.

Whether or not you wind up believing with Gatto that un-schooling is the way to go, you owe it to yourself to read this wonderful history of education and analysis of the things that are wrong with it. What you do next is up to you, but you will have taken the vital first step which is taking control of your child's education.

NB: You can download this book for free, but I am sure it is one you will want to have on your bookshelf. Also, it is a lot easier to read a bound edition than a PDF.