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Pretexts

Pretext: An Essay Review of Stephen Arons' *Compelling Belief: The Culture of American Schooling*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press

Compelling Belief - Nagging Questions

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I have spent some 40 years in schools, mostly public ones, as a student, teacher, teacher educator, and researcher. As an elementary school student from a lower middle class family, I was a "good girl," i.e., passive and compliant. In high school, I successfully played school and learned a bit of algebra and chemistry after the launching of Sputnik. College and graduate studies were enjoyable and, occasionally, intellectually stimulating. As a teacher, I eagerly sought to improve social studies education and, I hoped, society as well. In different ways, I've continued this reform effort from my university location in Pittsburgh and now Buffalo on the assumption that public schooling is desirable (despite its several limitations), reformable, and worth reforming both structurally and programmatically.

Stephen Arons' position in *Compelling Belief* is that government, viz., public, schooling does not and cannot support either a democratic society or individual freedom and fulfillment. He argues that the U.S. public school system contradicts the essence of the first amendment and calls for the separation of school and state. He argues that "the present political and financial structure of American schooling is unconstitutional" (p. 198); tax-supported, compulsory schooling, "in which pri-

vate [family] choices based on conscience and belief are subjected to the approval of the majority" (p. ix), and that this system is incompatible "with fundamental liberties in general and the First Amendment to the Constitution in particular" (p. 199). The problem as he sees it becomes "how to apply the First Amendment to compulsory public schooling" (p. 204) so as to preserve both compulsory schooling and freedom of belief and expression.

In reading this book, I reacted sympathetically to the situations Arons described but not to his definition of the problem and proposed solution. Within and outside education, we tend to focus our energies on pursuing a given or identified problem. What is infrequently recognized is that how a problem is framed influences the course of its solution. Is the nuclear problem, for example, one of deterrence or disarmament or something else? As much attention might well be given to problem-setting as problem-solving.

From my vantage point, Arons' definition of the problem is problematic and, consequently, his solution is untenable. He does, however, prompt the raising and pursuit of serious questions about the relationship of state and schooling in democratic societies.

Arons begins by outlining his position and detailing three categories of family-government (*viz.*, public school) value conflict: censorship or control of school policies, curriculum, and libraries; home education; and government regulation of private schools. The families' dissent and conflicts with school authorities are described and conclusions drawn on the basis of "discussions with dozens of families" (p. viii). He then offers his argument but no plan for the separation of school and state.

Arons presents the censorship, home education, and private school conflicts against a background of deepening cultural uncertainty and impending collapse of cultural explanations. Families are portrayed as struggling against school "agents of public orthodoxy" (p. vii) in their search for cultural meanings, satisfaction, and security. The schools are a major arena of conflict because of their crucial role in the socialization of children, particularly the inculcation of values and the

formation of consciousness. Given the importance of school socialization in shaping present and future beliefs and behavior, questions of control and/or choice of schools and school programs become paramount.

The minority families in conflict with public school authorities are engaged in battles for control over the socialization of their own children and, in some censorship cases, for the socialization of others' children as well. Majority control of compulsory public schooling and government regulation of home education and private school options violate the rights of minorities, especially those who cannot afford the alternative schooling that is available. Public schooling as presently constituted in the U.S. is characterized as "a supressor of dissent and a manipulator of political consciousness" (p. 190). Families, according to Arons, not only have the right to hold their preferred values and transmit them to their children, but also to "have them become part of the unavoidable inculcating process of schooling" (p. 74). Parents and families certainly have interests in controlling their children's schooling but whether they have legal or constitutional rights is another matter.

Given this definition of the problem, Arons' solution is a reinterpretation of the first amendment. He would "broaden the First Amendment's traditional protection of *expression* of belief and opinion to embrace the *formation* of belief and opinion" (p. 205). Freedom of expression is meaningless without freedom to formulate one's beliefs. Compulsory public schooling limits freedom of belief formation insofar as it "regulate[s] the development of ideas and opinions by controlling the transmission of culture and the socialization of children" (p. 206).¹ Consequently:

Wherever beliefs, world views, values, or ideologies are at stake, the Constitution must be read to impose the same government neutrality as is brought into play with regard to religion. If the First Amendment is applied to the reality of schooling as it has developed in this century, the conclusion must be that individual liberty, the healthy function-

ing of the political system, and the preservation of a truly public and governable public-school system require a separation of school and state. (pp. 212-213)

Accepting this "solution" means "insuring the reality of school choice for all families [not individuals] and prohibiting local, state, or federal governments from regulating the content of nongovernment schooling, directly or indirectly, except where compelling justifications exist" (p. 213). This is to be accomplished through an "equitable funding mechanism for private schooling" (p. 216). Such a mechanism remains undefined and probably undefinable. The three criteria Arons offers—avoiding economic and racial discrimination and protection "individuals, families, and schools from government manipulation of beliefs and world views" (p. 220)—are contradictory insofar as some beliefs and world views condone discrimination.

Arons has created a monster; either the problem is insoluble or one dies of the cure. Inconsistencies in his argument and neglected questions, however, render the monster toothless if not pathetically impotent. Neither his problem (applying a reinterpreted first amendment to compulsory public schooling so as to provide free family choice) nor his solution (publically funded private schooling) inevitably follow from the presented or available evidence.

Two interrelated inconsistencies are of particular concern to me, both of which reflect competing democratic political values that cannot be fully realized in particular situations. One is the clash between family and individual rights or interests. The second pits freedom from "government coercion" against "compelling justifications" for state intervention. Arons seems not to accept that (a) because general values often conflict in practice, priorities need to be established and compromises negotiated, or (b) substituting one institutional coercion (e.g., family) for another (e.g., government) does not enhance individual freedom.

With respect to family versus individual rights or interests, Arons argues first for family rights (to control the school socialization of their children) against the power of government

schooling and then for individual rights (to the formation and expression of belief) to support his private school conclusion. He repeatedly affirms "the fundamental importance of voluntary family choice" (p. 74) in schooling. In arguing first amendment protection of such choice, he notes that:

So long as individual dignity matters, the individual ought to control his own education; where the individual is too young to make an informed and voluntary choice, his parents ought to control it. (p. 207)

The age that confers informed and voluntary choice on males or females is not indicated. Arons acknowledges but puts off "sorting out the rights of parents and children" until such time as "the rights of parents and the political majority are addressed" (p. 59). The desirability of separating these issues is questionable as are the assumptions of parental rights (in contrast to interests) and of unlimited parental control of childrearing. This may be but another instance of what a New England congressman is reported to have characterized as concern for individual human rights that begins at conception and ends at birth.

No matter how sincere and strongly held a family's beliefs, there would seem to be some justifiable limits to family choice for their children in education and other areas (e.g., medical care, physical punishment). With respect to education and schooling, it would seem that children have a right to learn and to know. Narrowly prescribed schooling, whether by government or parental decree, would violate that right. Children's present and future rights should not be jeopardized on the grounds of youth or traditional family prerogative.

In the absence of a public school system, Arons would tolerate "government coercion" (viz., regulation) of private schooling only when the justifications are "of such magnitude and widespread public importance—as for example the prevention of epidemics—that they can properly be regarded as more important than fundamental liberties" (p. 203). The only other example mentioned is protection against racial discrimination in school admissions, programs, curriculum, and distribution

of benefits. Clearly, the values of non-discrimination and protection against "government manipulation of beliefs and world views" cannot be absolute in practice. When individual, family, or group beliefs and world views are racially discriminatory or opposed to established practices of disease prevention and medical care, compelling justification exists for their denial of first amendment protection. In what other situations might the freedom of individuals, families, or groups be limited in the interests of others' freedom or the general welfare?

A related question is the extent to which there are compelling state interests in the education of young people. In his analysis of the U.S. educational system, Green (1980) describes control of the system in terms of a "structure of interests" that includes the interests of the state. The state has two compelling interests in Green's formulation: That individuals attain economic independence and "grant minimal obedience to civil law" (p. 22). The state also has "derived interests," i.e., interests stemming from efforts to secure its compelling interests. For example, the state has a derived interest in seeing "that children are not educated in ways that will threaten its continued existence" (p. 23). Continued existence of the state and our widely shared if not unanimously endorsed "civic culture" (Butts, 1980), in broad outline but not specific detail, is essential to the continued existence of individual, family, and group freedoms in the United States. Freedom cannot be sustained amidst chaos.

Yes, schooling does communicate messages that enhance the values and power of some groups to the detriment of others. But these messages are neither univocal nor widely interpreted and acted upon as intended by their senders (Cornbleth, 1984). The schools' contribution to socialization is much more complex and muted than Arons would have us believe.

Neglected questions meriting attention, in addition to those already noted, include: Who constitutes and controls the government(s) now regulating schooling? Under what circumstances are sincerely held beliefs sufficient or inviolable grounds for parents to "do their own thing" in educating their children? Within and outside education, how are public policy

decisions to be made in situations where core values conflict? (And, what are the appropriate distinctions between public and private spheres of choice and action?) To what extent do our curriculum practices make a multiplicity of perspectives available to students, including perspectives on decision-making and the implications of choice? What would be the consequences of disbanding the compulsory public school system? How can education options and choice be expanded, especially for minority groups, while sustaining the democratic civic culture that makes freedom possible?

Finally, what is the appropriate relationship between state and schooling in democratic societies? Arons' call for their separation is attention-getting but spurious; his own proposals call for an active state role in schooling albeit different from its present one. Prompting the consideration of these nagging questions is the major contribution of *Compelling Belief*.

Note

1. Questions of the nature and effects of schooling in this regard are assumed rather than examined. Arons claims that "there is a strong connection between the world views children are rewarded for adopting in school and their political activities and opinions as adults" (p. 207) but provides no supporting evidence. The political socialization research of the 1960s and 1970s and recent classroom studies suggest very weak school effects on students' political beliefs and behavior (see, e.g., Cornbleth, 1982; McNeil, 1981).

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Adventures in Monopolis: The Wonderland of Schooling in Arons' *Compelling Belief*

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"This book is about the stifling of dissent," Arons declares in his introduction (p. vii), noting the "paradox that a society should repress intellectual freedom with the institution of education." In these times, the defense of intellectual freedom in schooling needs all the friends it can get. By any measure, the freedom of American school students to learn, think, and express themselves is being subjected to increasingly frequent, widespread, and serious attack. In 1986 an AAUP report identified the increasing incidence of elementary and secondary textbook censorship as a hinderance to students' ability to advance in higher education, and an obstacle to students' gaining the full benefit of an undergraduate education. Annual surveys by People for the American Way have shown a tripling of censorship in the last four years. In the last two years, the reports by People For have documented not only increasing numbers of censorship attempts, but also an increasing frequency of such attempts resulting in the actual removal of challenged materials from classrooms and school libraries. The surveys also reveal an increasing percentage of such incidents being coordinated by national organizations on the Far Right, including Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, Pat Robertson's National Legal Foundation, Beverly LaHaye's Concerned Women for America, and Citizens for Excellence in Education, which "has pledged to bring 'public education back under the control of Christians' and to do so by taking 'complete control of all local school boards.'"¹

People For has provided legal defense in major federal cases litigated by some of these groups. One example is the 1987

Alabama case litigated by the National Legal Foundation, in which several social studies and home economics texts were thrown out for being religious (i.e., “secular humanist”), because they didn’t say enough about theistic religion.² In a 1986 case in Tennessee, another federal judge supported parents represented by Concerned Women for American, on the basis of their fear that “after reading the entire Holt series, a child might adopt the views of a feminist, a pacifist, an anti-Christian, a vegetarian or an advocate of a ‘one-world government’.”³ More than four hundred complaints about the Holt, Rinehart and Winston reading series included specific objections to stories involving mention of religious worship by American Indians and followers of Islam, a story about a woman challenging her husband’s authority, and stories referring to dinosaurs as existing earlier than the time when creationists believe that the world began, as well as similar objections to familiar stories like *Cinderella*, *Macbeth*, and *The Wizard of Oz*. Although the outcome in this case might look like a defeat for freedom of thought and expression, Arons himself has described the judge’s ruling as “eminently reasonable” (*Education Week*, November 5, 1986, p. 19); so we do need to review the argument presented in his book before we rush to welcome him as an ally in the defense of intellectual freedom for American school students.

Arons devotes an entire chapter to a critique of ‘the traditional watchdogs of individual liberty who have attempted to defend the students’ First Amendment rights “in scores of state and federal courts”;

In these legal battles, civil libertarians, unlike the censors themselves, see that censorship threatens the system of freedom of expression upon which democracy depends. What they cannot, or will not, see is that schooling without individual family choice must always violate these same civil liberties. (p. 65)

Arons faults the civil libertarians for “creating and relying on concepts that do everything but address the central contradiction between the [majoritarian] structure of schooling and

the meaning of individual liberty” (pp. 67, 74). As an example, Arons challenges the conceptual distinction between “coercion” and “persuasion” that the New York Civil Liberties Union was relying on when it argued (in a Long Island censorship case) that the First Amendment does not allow school officials to “foster majoritarian values by eliminating conflicting values” (p. 69). In rejecting their argument as meaningless, however, Arons forgets that the New York CLU is simply repeating the exact language and rationale of Justice Jackson’s opinion in the *Barnette* case,⁴ which Arons invokes to support his argument that public schooling *per se* is intrinsically a violation of First Amendment rights and values. Arons’ basic first Amendment argument was presented more directly in a previous article, which begins by declaring categorically that “Schooling is everywhere and inevitably a manipulator of consciousness, an inculcator of values in young minds.”⁵

The argument in this book likewise rests on a view of “the unavoidable inculcating process of schooling” (p. 74) in which “intellectual freedom” is reduced to a question of who gets to control that process by deciding which values and beliefs will be stamped into the children’s minds. Arons quotes J. S. Mill’s description of state-sponsored schooling as “a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another” in order to establish “a despotism over the mind” (p. 195). Arons generalizes this view of learning by dealing with the current controversies as a conflict over parents’ “ability to dissent in the molding of their children’s minds” (p. 212). He insists repeatedly throughout the book that schools are used for “manipulating the consciousness of children” (p. x) and “consciousness manipulation” (p. 165) “to control the opinions” of the people (p. 195). He concludes that “The majoritarian structure of schooling, by requiring the attempt at coercive consensus, inevitably violates freedom of belief and expression” (p. 74). To make sense of Arons’ argument, it is important to understand that he is not opposing the *coerciveness* that he regards as the inevitable character of any and all schooling. His repetitious rhetoric is insistent on this point (although it is unlikely to persuade readers who support the public schools as an institution with

a distinctive potential for promoting the emancipatory development of students' intellectual and other capabilities). He never interrupts his tirade long enough to consider how Justice Jackson, the CLU, and others might intelligently understand "the meaning of individual liberty" in terms of a distinction between coercive and non-coercive education. Although he cites one of Kozol's books for a number of observations on how "liberal" pedagogy tends to undermine students' moral autonomy, Arons somehow misses Kozol's motivating conviction that education can be "either for domestication or for freedom."⁶

Arons' conclusion that *public schooling* "inevitably violates freedom" by "requiring the attempt at coercive consensus" is not based on the *coerciveness* as such, but on the monopolistic orthodox *consensus* in which students are supposedly "compelled to believe." According to Arons, "it is fair to refer to the prevailing school practices of any era as a form of publicly sponsored orthodoxy" (pp. x-xi); and he does so from the first page (vii) of his introduction ("struggle...between the forces of private dissent and the agents of public orthodoxy") to the book's penultimate sentence (p. 221: "repressive enforcement of bureaucratic order or outworn orthodoxy"). If this is not your view of public schooling, Arons again tries to persuade through repetition rather than by argument. His polemical monotone drones on and on about "a bureaucratic defense of public orthodoxy" (p. 125), "irreconcilable conflict over orthodoxy" (p. 19), "the war over public-school orthodoxy" (pp. 64, 190; cf. pp. 28, 29), and "doing battle with neighbors over whose values shall become public-school orthodoxy" (p. 211). After reviewing a number of censorship cases, Arons concludes that "the struggle was among competing parental groups, and the aim was control of the government power needed to transform private values into public orthodoxy" (p. 193).

Where public schools have been attacked by those who want to ban the unorthodox ideas and materials that they see in school libraries and classrooms, Arons would say that "Both sides sought to control value orthodoxy by controlling literature and curriculum" (p. 25), since "the process by which any books or curriculums are selected—even by liberals—is also censor-

ship. Whoever wins a battle for control of orthodoxy in schools is, by definition, a censor" (p. 26). In the dispute over creationism, he concludes that "those who adhere to the scientific world view...are also attempting to control public-school ideology," despite efforts on each side "to avoid appearing to be engaged in a battle for control of public orthodoxy in schools" (p. 35).

What makes matters even worse, in Arons' view, is that the schools are not content with merely "compelling belief" in one set of orthodox ideas. Beyond even that, he sees the schools attempting to monopolize all thought and opinion, to the extent that there is "no room" for the "values and beliefs" of dissenting parents who need "to seek the approval of state and local school authorities" in order to express and pass on their beliefs and values through the rearing of their own children (pp. 115, 191). Arons suggests that the parents' "entitlement" to hold their own values, and seek the "extension" of those values to their children, has been denied when parents are displaced from their "natural role as teachers" during the "thirty hours per week" when public schools are supposed to "substitute for the child-rearing function of families," in schoolrooms "where communication, belief, and human development are focused six hours a day" (pp. 52-55, 109-110, 202).

If we pry the arithmetic loose from Arons' Humpty Dumpty logic and semantics, it appears that students are in class less than one quarter of the waking hours during their school years. Arons' real complaint is not that schooling leaves "no room" for parents to transmit their own values and beliefs, but rather that the law provides *no shelter* for removing children from exposure to the diversity of values and beliefs competing in a pluralistic nation. Arons does report the intention of some parents to "insulate their children" in schools designed for "separation of the faithful from society," to the extent that they "will not even engage in sports contests with schools whose students are tainted by humanistic beliefs" (pp. 146-151). He also reports that public school supporters express concern about children being subjected to "an even more rigid orthodoxy" in home schooling than any school system could impose; but he glibly disposes of such expression as amounting to no more than a

reiteration of what Tyack has disclosed to be an ideological definition of public schooling as “the one best system” (pp. 121-123).

Meanwhile, Tyack himself has spoken out in defense of public schooling as an institution of unique importance for the future of democracy, and warns against the way he and other revisionist historians have been used in recent anti-public school politics.⁷ In the real world, seemingly disparate attacks on public education are coalescing with the development of increasingly concentrated anti-democratic power.”⁸ Only in Arons’ dogmatic Wonderland is the realm of freedom confined to a private sector threatened by a monopolistic, totalizing public sphere. Arons is theoretically blinded by the crude social Darwinism he relies on (esp. pp. 92-134) in lieu of genuine social or political theory, which would have enabled him to see through formalistic legal definitions, and to realize that much of the political state’s ideological apparatus “is private—churches, political parties, trade unions, families, private schools, newspapers, etc.”⁹

Arons does deserve credit for raising issues that demand serious consideration. My focus here is determined by how dangerous the book’s failings have become in these times, when the defense of students’ intellectual freedom does need all the friends it can get. In these times we have a Chief Justice who has written (with the support of three other Justices) that when government “acts as educator,” its actions “do not raise the same First Amendment concerns as actions by the government as sovereign,” which follows from his view of education as essentially consisting of “the selective presentation and explanation of ideas.”¹⁰ Arons rightly recognizes that these Justices share his view of education; but this is only one position in the controversy, a position that the CLU, People for the American Way, and others are struggling to overcome. Instead of joining in the struggle for intellectually emancipatory education in public schools, Arons simply accepts coercive education as the premise for his condemnation of the public schools. With more friends like Stephen Arons, the cause of intellectual freedom for students would have no need for enemies like William Rehnquist.

Footnotes

¹*Attacks on the Freedom to Learn, 1985-1986* (Wash., DC: People for the American Way, 1986), quoted in the American Library Association’s *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* XXXV (6), Nov. 1986: 203; *Attacks. . . , 1984-1985* in *Newsletter* XXXIV (6), Nov. 1985: 187. Also, Commission on Academic Freedom and Pre-College Education, *Liberty and Learning in the Schools: Higher Education’s Concerns* (Wash., DC: American Association of University Professors, 1986), reported in the *ALA Newsletter* XXXVI (1), Jan 1987: 7, 35.

²*Smith v. Bd. of School Commissioners of Mobile County*, U.S. Dist. Ct. for So. Dist. of AL, So. Div., March 4, 1987

³*Mozert v. Public Schools*; see *ALA Newsletter* XXXVI (1), Jan 1987: 1, 36-39.

⁴*W.Va. Bd. of Ed. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943).

⁵Stephen Arons and Charles Lawrence III, “The Manipulation of Consciousness: A First Amendment Critique of Schooling,” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Review* 15 (2), Fall 1980: 309-361.

⁶Jonathan Kozol, *The Night is Dark and I am Far from Home* (New York: Continuum, 1986; Orig. Pub. 1975), p. 2, quoting Joao Coutinho.

⁷David Tyack, “Reformulating the Purposes of Public Education in an Era of Retrenchment,” *Educational Studies* 11, 1980: 49-64. Cf. “Freedom of Thought and Majority Rule in the Public School: The Bankruptcy of Liberal Ideology?” (Tyack’s critical but mixed review of this book), *Teachers College Record* 85 (4), Summer 1984: 653-662.

⁸See, e.g., Ann Bastian, Norm Fruchter, Marilyn Gittrell, Colin Greer, and Kenneth Haskins, *Choosing Equality: The Case for*

Democratic Schooling (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

⁹Martin Carnoy, *The State and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 96, referring to Althusser; cf. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London: NLB, 1975).

¹⁰*Bd. of Ed., Island Trees . . . v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982), at pp. 909-910, 914. Although Rehnquist's opinion is technically a dissent, the four Justices who agreed on his "government as educator" doctrine equals the number supporting Brennan's opinion "for the Court." For more on *Pico* and related issues, see my *Constitution and Curriculum; Semiotic Analysis of Cases and Controversies in Education, Law and Social Science* (London: Falmer, forthcoming 1988).

[note: the book referenced here was actually published in 1991:

Whitson, James Anthony. *Constitution and Curriculum : Hermeneutical Semiotics of Cases and Controversies in Education, Law, and Social Science*. London ; New York: Falmer Press, 1991.]