

Friedrich August Ludwig von der Marwitz, “On the Causes of Crime Getting out of Hand” (1836)

Abstract

Written by the Prussian noble landlord Friedrich August von der Marwitz (1777–1838), this essay relates to contemporary discussions about the expansion of public education for the lower classes, a subject to which much attention was given after the freeing of Prussia’s serfs. The author, an almost caricature-like epitome of a Prussian reactionary, clearly opposes this expansion. He argues that anything beyond teaching children the basics of reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion would just corrupt the common people and thus foster crime.

Source

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One may object that if children enjoy a careful schooling up through their confirmation, they can slip into delinquency en masse immediately afterwards.

In our province, our villages have no lack of schools. When one undertook thirty years ago to regenerate (as it was termed) the people, schools were hardly ignored. Instead, they were restructured with great zeal and the lessons were expanded many times over, a process that has continued up through the present. One was of the opinion, and generally still is, that the best person is the one who knows the most; it appeared that virtue, the fear of God, and an honorable character were considered the inseparable companions of the knowledgeable man.

Instead of religious instruction being seen as the only absolutely necessary course of study— proficient reading of the Bible and the hymnal, and writing for those who paid extra, whereby three hours a day all through the winter was sufficient—now we teach German language, arithmetic up through fractions and ratios, geography, natural history, botany, and general history, with a variety of comprehension exercises. In every country school one can now hear lectures not only on prepositions and verbs, but also about prosody and syntax; capital and interest are calculated; children learn about lines of longitude and latitude, the torrid zone, the causes of long and short days, solar and lunar eclipses, etc.; they know that a whale is a mammal and they recognize poisonous plants, Alexander the Great, and Genghis Kahn. They all write well, especially the girls, who will never again pick up a pen after they leave school.

It is natural that religion’s simple truths and the recognition of duty would recede into the background next to these profound studies. How quickly does a child, burdened with all the above-mentioned things, learn the few answers that are necessary for a religion or morals exam! These, too, were given the lowest priority up until a few years ago and were designed to make schoolteachers independent of preachers, which succeeded in part.

Otherwise, more emphasis has been placed on religious studies in the last few years. But the consequences of the other varied fields of study (even if they are only superficial) are so corrupting, that they cannot be negated by religious instruction.

All schoolbooks, a few very new ones excepted, are demagogic in nature. The *Brandenburgische Kinderfreund* and the books by Wilmsen, etc., preach freedom and equality. Indeed, the previously well-known *Not- und Hilfsbüchlein* presents a picture of a village community that, although it has a good lord,

cannot achieve happiness until a constitution has been introduced. According to these principles and with these objects, the youths are educated, removed from their jobs, and provoked to arrogance.

Understandably, much time is needed for this. Children must attend school once they are six years old and are confirmed when they are fourteen. If they have waited until they are seven, then confirmation occurs when they are fifteen. They must remain in school for eight years and sit there six hours a day in winter and three hours a day in summer.

What is the result? Because the schools are diligently visited by the superintendents, who make reports that determine the future careers of the schoolmasters, they make efforts to parade the oldest children and to elicit correct answers from them which attest to their education. The small children sit there for years, six hours every day, a primer in front of their noses with letters and, later, short sentences, so that they can learn to read. Then they move on to writing books, practicing strokes and single letters. The schoolmaster is not in a position to spend much time with them and to awaken them, otherwise the parade of the older children cannot take place. The little ones are thus stunted. When they grow up, the majority are incapable of comprehending what is expected. They catch little snippets here and there, and the clever ones among them, who overcome everything, are immediately given over to the vice of haughtiness.

The source of all further evil is that, because of their continual presence in school, the children are so far removed from their parents' sight that they are now used to considering the education of their children as solely the responsibility of the schoolmaster, and they hardly concern themselves with it anymore.

Usually when the children weren't in school, they observed their father or their mother or their neighbor at work and helped out, as all children have a natural work instinct and try to do what a grown up does. And when they lay on a field behind oxen or pigs or geese, they learned about God's nature, the animals, the birds, the fields, and the business of farming, and they practiced it again and again.

Now they succumb to whatever thoughts they have or speculate further about those that were taught to them and consider themselves more intelligent than their parents and hope to become more than they are. The parents let their children go, and the best ones complain about it. Unfortunately, many children now only see their fathers drunk, their mothers quarreling, or both thieving.

It was not so long ago that I spoke with a peasant about his son, who had distinguished himself in school.

He said, "Praise the Lord that it will soon be over, he'll be confirmed this year."

I said: "Why 'praise the Lord'? He spent his time very well."

He: "Ach! He knows nothing at all, he still has everything to learn."

I: "You're wrong, he's the best in the school and knows enough."

He: "Yes, he knows about elephants and about the moon, and wants to be smart—but he can't bridle a horse or drive a plow, he can't even chase down hogs from the courtyard; he corrals them from one corner into another. When I was his age, I could do everything, but I still can't write and never needed to my entire life. He writes as well as the sexton, but what will he write? He was to plow and plant and harvest, that's what he has to do!"

And this peasant was a very reasonable, industrious, well-off man, the oracle of the entire community, and he was right—for these youth who are the best in their class are almost always drawn away from their callings, they speculate about a better and more comfortable condition, and are mostly lost.

I myself have for years committed the error of looking for servants who were praised for their abilities in school, and every time I was deceived. They were lazy, practically useless, noticed nothing and comprehended nothing. Yet they were arrogant, show-offs, and sometimes rogues.

Now I never take on a so-called clever one, but instead hire quiet ones who otherwise perform everything very well but cannot grasp anything to do with school learning. These ones are practical and notice and comprehend everything that they see, but not what they are lectured about.

I expressed my astonishment at this to a civil servant and his wife. He said, "Certainly, I've known this for a long time, who would hire a servant who was bright in school? For a long time now, I've hired only the dumb ones, who are clever in exactly the things I need." And his wife said, "I never hire smart maids; they are never hardworking and modest."

I have already noted that, when a child has taken such a bad direction on account of his studies, the most diligent religious instruction by a preacher cannot change anything on its own. One of the bright young lads I had hired as a servant and whom I hoped to enlighten could discuss the New Testament as well as any preacher. Indeed, he was able to transcribe the content of a sermon, but when I pointed out his mistakes to him, he was as stubborn as a mule and sinned just as he had before.

How can such a person be helped? Religion must once again be made the sole foundation of all school lessons, so that every person learns: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, and thy neighbor as thyself, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house."

What is the problem with the criminals, with the demagogues and the revolutionaries, if not that they covet their neighbor's house? If that is taught to the youth, then people in the country can dispense with all of the pedantry that is being taught in their schools. They must be instructed in fewer things, but with more emphasis placed upon fulfilling their duties, upon loyalty and obedience. They need to spend less time sitting still and more time working.

This will be difficult to achieve and will be opposed by the entire educated world, for in the contemporary world it is as though the serpent spoke only yesterday: "For God doth know that in the day ye eat of the tree of knowledge, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods." Whereupon they looked upon the tree and saw that it was pleasant to the eyes and a tree to be desired to make one wise and they took of the fruit thereof and did eat.

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Source: Friedrich August Ludwig von der Marwitz, "Von den Ursachen der überhandnehmenden Verbrechen" (1836), in *Die Eigentumslosen*, edited by Carl Jantke and Dietrich Hilger. Freiburg and Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 1965, pp. 140–44.

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