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ABSTRACT

In discussing the school system and school reforms, the author examines in detail some well known dilemmas of the present-day school system -- those connected with egalitarian ideology and selective outcome, with mass education and inherent social inequalities, with the striving for more general education, and with the needs of the labor market. The author speaks mainly of highly industrialized European and North-American countries, excluding the Third World and socialist countries. For social and historical reasons, school and educational reforms are less successful than expected. School reform projects must take into account some of the more or less neglected factors. First, a thorough preliminary analysis of future reform projects must be undertaken to determine how realistic they are. Second, it is necessary to think about unwanted, indirect social effects of any reform. Third, a better knowledge about the interconnections between school and social structure is needed. On the whole, it is important to know not only the aims, but also what is possible to accomplish in any given situation, and what the tools are that would lead to the direction sought. (Author/JR)

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SOME PROBLEMS OF THE SCHOOL-SYSTEM AND THE SCHOOL REFORMS

1. Introduction

Let me begin this work with apologies. Sociology does not mean for me an abstract science, but is a tool of conscious social action. Therefore the bulk of my work is usually focussed on the problems in Hungary. Thus I might not be the best person for starting this discussion where the problems of any one country have to be replaced by more general issues. But, after all, it is not of prime importance who starts the ball rolling.

However, and that is a second problem, the general issues will not be of a truly universal character. They are related to the school-system of highly industrialized European and North-American countries. Thus, although the main title is "The functions of the school-system", the specific difficulties of the third world are left aside. Their analysis would require a different analytical frame and special competence. Also, I do not speak about socialist countries. These countries certainly have some special difficulties and achieved some important special results. The main difference between them and the capitalist countries lies, from this perspective, in the disappearance of the vested interests connected with the private property of capital - a fact that favours intended social change in general, and the simultaneous change of school and society in particular. Nonetheless, the main problems dealt with here

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stem partly from the past of the actual school-system and partly from the actual structure of the social division of labour. Discussing them on the basis of the experience of advanced capitalist countries may be therefore relevant - even if in a modified way - for both types of countries.

More explicitly, I propose to discuss in some detail the well-known dilemmas of the present-day school-system, those connected e.g. with egalitarian ideology and selective outcome, with mass-education and inherent social inequalities, with the striving for more "general education" and the needs of the labour market. They are systematized by means of an analytical frame that connects the actual difficulties with, on the one hand, the socially determined past history of the school, and on the other with the whole system of actual social relations. Although my formulations are in the affirmative, it has to be clear that the whole discussion is hypothetical and open to doubts, from the selection of the issues to the proposed analytical frame.

2. The historical antecedents of actual tensions

Even if school has a long history, it is not uninterrupted. The actual dual network goes back partly to the early middle-ages, partly to the dawn of capitalism. The former evolution led to something that might be termed the "elit-system", that was built up by beginning with the top, and whose main institution is the university. The construction of the second network is related to the rise of capitalism, and is characterized by a different process of development. It was begun by the bottom, and was meant to be a "popular system". 1)

At least three factors contributed to the creation of the second network at the time of its formation, roughly at the end of the 18th century. One of them was the humanistic perspective connected with the Enlightenment, that held cultural values in special esteem and wanted to make them available to the biggest number possible. Another factor was that the new class differences, based on new objective conditions, required, in order to be made acceptable, a new ideology and new methods of transmitting it. The third, probably the most important factor was connected with the effective requirements of production: the new techniques that had to be applied in the division of labour could be acquired less and less as part of the normal socialization process within the family, because of two interconnected reasons: quick technical change and a high rate of occupational (even if not necessarily social) mobility.

The three factors mentioned mean three different aims or functions. They are so radically different in contents that they could have produced three practically independent institutions. This would have been all the more understandable because the three above aims are not really complementary, but might clash. (Universal "cultural uplifting" and ideological subduing are certainly contradictory.) However, the bulk of the three functions was taken over, at least apparently, by only one institution, the school. This is partly explained by historical reasons. It is well known that it is more easy and more frequent to fill old institutions with new contents (i. e. to pour new wine in old bottles), than to "invent" entirely new institutions. And although the school of the middle ages fulfilled much less of the three above mentioned tasks than its modern counter-part (the Church had a bigger role, vocational

training was given mainly in the corporations etc.) the model was given. A continuity of this type has obviously serious consequences. Since the rupture with the past can never be complete, the new tasks are usually fulfilled only partially, and with more or less bias. This danger is the more acute, the closer is the connection between the old and the new structure of interests, not apparently or in declarations, but in fact. Another reason for the unification of the threefold task is that this was the best way to eliminate the conflicts among the tasks, i.e. to assure that they be carried out so as not to endanger the prevailing class- and interest structure.

Because of these conditions, the adaptation of the old frames to the new aims was only partly successful. It seems that the ideological function was carried out most perfectly, not only because of the openly transmitted contents but also because the whole school structure and its inner mechanisms acted in this direction. As far as the general cultural uplifting is concerned, instead of being really universal, this cultural transmission became selective according to social classes. Thus, "high-culture" remained the more or less exclusive monopoly of the otherwise privileged classes. (That is the main reason why this culture appears now exclusively as class-culture.)

However, it is with the transmission of skills that the situation became the most awkward. The conditions of the division of labour required skills of different levels, to be learned in more or less time. This type of training belonged only in part to the profile of the traditional school-system, but the part that belonged there was high-level skill,

offered by the universities (doctors, lawyers, professors of theology). It was then quite natural that the new system incorporated first this type of training: it had a historical model, and could be taken over easily, the more so, since the interests of the ruling class also pointed in this direction. And while the skills required by factory work also increased and became more varied, the school-system did not build into its practice this type of training until the mid-twentieth century, or sometimes until to-day.

Thus the three basic aims or functions were already at work at the beginning of the 19th century. Since, however, they were only partially realized, they came again to the fore at the next important turning point of the school, in the last third of the 19th century, when the State took over the organisation of compulsory schooling. But the situation did not change fundamentally even then. Subsequent social and technical changes rendered more acute and brought sometimes to the open the conflicts that always existed but remained hidden.

The end-product is the actual situation that we use to describe as the crisis of the school-system. The gravity of the situation mobilized a great number of educational experts who produced analytical descriptions, critical studies and various proposals. As a result, a number of real changes and reforms were introduced so that it is no exaggeration to say that the school changed more in the last 10 to 15 years than during the previous 50 years. The impact of the reforms is, however, less than expected, and the problems remain at least as acute as they ever were. This leads to disappointment and disillusion. That is why it might prove

useful to continue here the debate about the failure of the reforms and of the potential social value of some of the new projects.

3. The first disillusion : School could not redeem society

For many, school meant not only the tool of universal cultural uplifting, but also, because of that, the means of ameliorating society. A great number of reformers also understood that it is not enough to create more and better schools, but schools that could contribute to solve social problems that were not created by school themselves. It was realized that the crux of the matter was the unequal distance of the school from children of various social and cultural backgrounds, who, because of this, were more or less successful in school and were, therefore, more or less able to respond to the endeavours of cultural uplifting. Hence stemmed the projects that, by means of different compensatory or headstart-type programs tried to bring the child closer to the school. Somewhat later it was also realized that the original distance could be diminished more effectively and in a more democratic way if the school tried to get closer to the child, via new pedagogic methods. The third main type of reforms aimed at weakening the school-mechanisms that served to reinforce the original disadvantages. I include here e.g. the replacement of the openly selective school-structure by comprehensive schools and unstreamed, homogeneous classes.

A tremendous amount of effort, goodwill, time and money were absorbed in these projects, which remained sometimes in the experimental stage, and were introduced other times as nationwide reform-programs.

Undeniably, there are results that justify, at least partially, the efforts. After all, if the number of nice and well-equipped schools multiply, that is already an advantage, even if the inner mechanisms do not really change.

Nevertheless, social researchers and educators sooner or later became disappointed with the reforms. It turned out that the results obtained in early compensatory or headstart programs get lost during subsequent school-years. New methods aiming at bringing the school nearer to the child are practically impossible to be introduced everywhere because of the lack of pedagogic and preliminary social conditions. As far as comprehensive strategies are concerned, the new structures find more than one way to reintroduce in disguised forms the practice of selectivity.

The major problem is, however, that even the basic aim seems to be in danger. The adherents of "cultural uplifting" hoped that with better education they could form people who were not only more cultured, more knowledgeable, but also better prepared to lead a social life rich in human content, ^{able} to understand society itself. It is hard to measure to what extent these hopes were realized. But it seems that in the most advanced countries there did not occur a radical change in the "quality of life" in the above sense. I don't want to minimize the importance of huge "civilizational" gains characterizing this period. But the prophets of school and education were not striving only for them, but for a more far-reaching transformation of man and society.

The failure is, then, dual : school did not succeed in building up a better society in general ; and could not radically diminish social inequalities that, though not generated by school, looked as if they could be reduced by it. The disenchantment that followed could entail several different reactions.

One possible reaction is, in any case, a disenchantment with social reforms in general. The logic is clear : if all the efforts put into the school-system up to now remained, for a large part, ineffective, then it does not make sense to persist in purposeful social reform at all. This is all the more so because the other institutions to be reformed are even less promising than the school since they have even less opportunity to exert an impact on practically everybody, for a long time, in a compulsory way. This disenchantment may mean simply a pessimistic outlook, or may lead to a more conservative, functionalist conviction. According to this, if society rejects all those reforms, it is because the reforms are not really necessary or functional. A radical intervention may, at most, spoil the natural equilibrium composed, as it were, of a system of advantages and disadvantages, of differences and inequalities, too.

Another possible outcome is the rejection of the school. If school-reforms fail, it is because school is unable to change, at least in a fundamental way. The conclusion is that school is a superfluous and harmful institution. If its bureaucratic organization and spirit has any impact at all on the child, this is mainly negative. Instead of developing

creative personalities, it kills independence and originality and leads towards "intellectual suicide". Thus compulsory schooling has to be abolished. The most prominent spokesman of this logic, I. Illich, completes his devastating criticism by proposing a new form of learning, based on a voluntary, self-selected, personal relation between teacher and taught.

There is no doubt that the major part of Illich's criticisms are well-founded and I suspect that his popularity is due more to that than to his propositions. As far as these are concerned, even if I cannot analyze them here in detail, let me mention one or two aspects that are open to social or sociological doubts. The main problem (for me at least) is, what happens in this system with social determinisms? Actually they operate with full strength. To be sure, the school, despite all the efforts, helps only some to break through the barriers created by birth. (That is how the major part of individual mobility actually occurs.) We have to realize, however, that the system of Illich is even less helpful in weakening social determinisms. In fact, in his system they operate, if possible, more freely than now. He who wants to learn, who knows what he wants, and knows how and where to find the tools to approach his aim, will be able to learn in a freer and more rational way than today. But what happens with the others? How will they acquire the minimum amount of information that is necessary for everyday life? And if someone has no personal model whatsoever and happens not to be a genius, how will he know what is there to be wanted? A society of teaching and learning is a beautiful utopia. But if society is dominated by the logic of the market and the fragmentation of work, if, because

of this, it is characterized by group- and class differences, by systems of privileges and disprivileges, then the utopia is rather unrealistic. And if society was rid of all these evils, then its school might be different, too.

In fact, that is the third possible reaction to the failures of school reforms, i.e. that the reasons are to be looked for not in the school, but in society. Just as the results of Headstart are annihilated by subsequent traditional schooling, so are the results of secondary school reforms lost when children enter adult life.

To sum up, school cannot transform society. Advanced, hierarchically organized division of labour, manual and non-manual, simple and complex, "good" and "bad" work, superior and inferior, positions, are separated and even opposed to each other, not to speak about the basic opposition between the propertied and the propertyless. This organization presupposes and enforces the unequal distribution of knowledge, not only of skills and professional knowledge, but all types of knowledge that can help to make life more full and more meaningful. The given division of labour explains even that, since it organizes not only the work, but also the whole life-situation, the way of life, the social praxis of people. If forms and contents of the life outside work would be similar with everybody, or if they were differentiated at random, independently of the class position and the place within the division of labour, then why should individuals accept that their work tasks are differing so fundamentally, in working conditions as well as in content, autonomy, rewards? The more equal distribution of knowledge about social interconnections would seriously endanger the acceptance of,

and the identification with, the status quo. Jules ~~Marx~~ describes convincingly the dangers of more knowledge. "... our children get the best education compatible with a society that requires a high-level of stupidity in order to exist as it is. A moment's reflection will convince anyone that this is true. For example, if television had a truly well educated audience and the newspapers and magazines well educated readers, the economy would collapse because, since nobody would then be impressed by the advertising, they would not buy ... They might even begin to question the need for a standard of living that has spread wall to wall carpeting from here to California and given millions more space and more mobility than they can intelligently use. In the light of these terrifying possibilities the thought of an education in depth and sharpness for everybody can only make a thoughtful person anxious, because an education for stupidity is the only one we can afford right now."

"I hope it is understood that no criticism is intended of socially necessary education for stupidity. Having been an educator much of my life, I understand that every civilization needs to introduce a reasonable amount of respectable intellectual sabotage into its educational system, lest the young get out of hand and challenge or scorn tradition and accepted canons of truth. Too much striving by intellectual Samsons will only bring the temple down; it surely can do not lasting harm to cut their hair a wee bit: a crowd of crew-cuts and flat-tops looks so much neater than a mob of long hairs. For a college teacher there is a certain comfort and tranquillity in dealing with students who have been trained in elementary and secondary school not to embarrass him by asking impertinent questions." 2)

There is even more to it: learning in school is fruitful only inasmuch as one is able to use in some way in "real life" what he was taught in school.

A child deprived of this hope considers school requirements as irrelevant, i.e. uninteresting and superfluous. Social practice, on its turn, cannot allow the use of much more, and more equally distributed, knowledge. This means that even if school attains some more success, the majority of this result is lost later on.

All this does not mean that the school reforms mentioned up to now would not have any sense, even besides the fact of having more and nicer schools. But it is probably true that the social barriers of the reforms needed to be taken into account early during their elaboration. And perhaps it is also true that the creation of social conditions allowing the utilization of more knowledge would be as important as the creation of better schools.

4. The second disillusion : school products and the structure of skills cannot fully be brought into harmony

Technical and scientific development require always more skill and professional knowledge. Those who do not fight for the school with the motto of cultural uplifting use the argument of the necessity of more skill. This argument comprises the necessity of selection according to ability and merit. In fact, the different tasks demand different abilities and different levels of knowledge that are more or less easily acquired. The selection of those who are able to learn more can be accomplished with objectivity and thoroughness during elementary and secondary schooling. It might also be added that, since better ability and longer

training (the equivalent of more knowledge) assure a better social position, it is clear that selection according to ability is an important means of individual social mobility.

These tasks, i.e. selection, promotion, etc., were on the whole carried out successfully by the school. Even if one might question the success of general cultural uplifting, and might doubt that human life was enriched, technical development is an undeniable fact. Implicitly this means that there was enough skill to assure this process, which again points to the success of the selection. Also, the rates of individual mobility are usually acceptably high. Despite all that the whole process presents problems.

- To begin with, one might ask, how far is it real and how far is it apparent that it is the school that dispenses the skills. The situation is quite ambiguous : school was rather selective in accepting the tasks of vocational training. I already mentioned that the school of the middle ages grew from the bottom to the top, while the reverse hold true for the modern school system. However, as far as vocational training is concerned, the modern school system followed also the historical logic of the elitist system. University level professional training was ensured from the very beginning. The profile of the university of the middle ages absorbed very quickly the subject-matters of the modern professions needed in the organization and management of modern production and administration (engineers, economists, scientists etc.). School-institutions that prepare for "middle-range" white-collar jobs (technicians, nurses) were created later, spread more slowly and they usually do not transmit every element of the job. After-school, on-the-job training

retained considerable importance. It is, however, school-type vocational training for manual jobs that is the latest development, still incompletely solved in a number of countries. What usually happens here is that the credential of the skilled worker is tied to a compulsory longer cycle of the traditional elementary school. The school, however, does not teach the skill, but more traditional subjects (such as language, history, literature), enriched with some theoretical aspects of the skill. Still, this last subject is not always really and substantially related to vocational practice. The practice is learned, on the other hand, not in normal-school-conditions, but in real factories. This training is, then, submitted, to the interests of the production, and the trainees, usually teenagers, form an integral part of the world of work of adults. School and factory, theory and practice, are for a large part cut off from each other, but their importance is not equal. For the future manual worker, it is mostly the practical training in the factory that is relevant for his future job and life.

Thus, it is only high-level professional training that became an organic part of school-type education. One of the main reasons might be that a model was elaborated for that since the middle-ages, showing how it is possible to couple selection according to ability and social factors for the positions offering privileges.

In case of the other jobs, school-type teaching of the skill remained more or less illusory. It is not so much the skill that was transformed into a school-subject, as the traditional subject-matters were transformed into social prerequisites of the vocational credential. Such a prolongation of the educational process certainly meets the

humanistic demands ('more culture for everybody'), and was therefore readily approved in these circles. Nonetheless, because of the irrelevance (under the given conditions) of what is taught in the school, prolonged schooling became more an obstacle than an aid in acquiring a vocational credential. School took over the formal and institutional aspects of vocational training when it became important to bar the road before at least some people - who could acquire the skill, perhaps better, outside the school.

This means that social selectivity is not the monopoly of higher education, but - though in a different way - vocational training is also characterized by it. It is, then, a feature of the whole system whereby it ensures - as Establiet and Baudelot³⁾ point it out - not only the transmission of the individual's social position by limiting social mobility, but also the undisturbed reproduction of the class-structure and the structure of the social division of labour.

That is where we arrive to the second major problem of vocational and professional training, i.e. to the distribution of the skills required by the productive system. Different types of distribution are conceivable even if we know that abilities are not equal, and that for a long time we might need unskilled work. However, the most economic solution - and, the one most in harmony with the given structure - is a distribution which is not continuous but discrete (i.e. there are gaps between the levels), and where the positions cannot be changed continuously but are stabilized, possibly for life. In other words, the division and the differentiation of work mean, at the same time, the division and differentiation of the workers, too.

That is why the special manpower training programs, whereby proponents try to reduce insecurity, unemployment and inequalities that ensue, are not really successful, either. As recent studies suggest (Robert Lekachman reviews two such studies in the 11 May 1974 issue of the Nation), "manpower development efforts have placed few people in jobs for which they are qualified by their new training ... (However), Congress and Presidents continue generous funding for such projects. After all, job training reinforces the work ethic, holds out the hope of removing people from welfare rolls and adding them to payrolls, and does in the end create some jobs - most of them for the trainers rather than the trainees." (p. 590) Reasons are not mentioned there, but it is plausible that they are to be looked for in the social organization of work. The labour market is not able to absorb (again, under the present conditions) everybody who has some skill, and needs also people to accept and perform the "bad" jobs. Therefore it will find out the way to reject part of the skilled workers on some, more or less well-founded pretext (e.g. by qualifying the special programs as inferior to traditional training). Those rejected will accept the judgement all the more easily because they are used to defencelessness, to situations where unknown powers decide their fate. ⁴⁾ And the programs in question will probably not teach them how to overcome this situation. Perhaps Paulo Freire's pedagogy could help there, but its inclusion in the program might not be a realistic hope.

Despite incomplete success, these endeavours are radical in outlook because they question the organizational principles of the system, and might exert some pressure in favour of breaking away from the complete overlap of the division of work and that of workers.

There is also another stream, more open to doubts. It is opposed not to the actual organization of work but to the process of selection, going as far as to forget that there might be a connection between abilities and the work done. I am referring to a rather recent feature of some American universities. They accept the social pressure towards the limitation of the number of students, which means that they cannot accept every candidate. But they apply a new method of selection, the selection at random.⁵⁾ This solution seems to be exceptionally radical since it rejects all types of social determinisms, and favouritism under any form. One of its minor weaknesses is to forget that those who apply to a University are already selected according to a number of criteria, so that social determinisms cannot be fully avoided. Another weak point is that randomness at this level might endanger the quality of work, so that even a badly operating system of selection according to merit might be preferable. In fact, even if one believes that abilities and aptitudes are entirely malleable, the process might hardly begin at the university level. Since "quality" will be needed, it will be assured (even more than today) by universities that cautiously safeguard their standards, and the degrees of non-selective universities will be inflated. But the major problem is elsewhere: this practice, without knowing it, "plays the game of the system". It accepts that there is little room on the top and that the places on the top are privileged. It only wants to change the composition of those on the top so that it be independent of social and ability factors, i.e. entirely undetermined. Fear from meritocracy passes here to anti-meritocracy, to the negation of any kind of merit or achievement. The ensuing social consequences might be rather awkward. Also, paradoxically, this procedure might legitimate the unconditional transmission of the social position of the father. In fact, if places on the top might be filled without any regard to merit, then

why would it be necessary e.g. to follow the old practice and legitimize it with some, more or less well-earned university degree? It is already "randomized" who is born where.

Just for the sake of clarity let me add that even if, in social policy, I reject the distinction between the "deserving" and the "non-deserving" poor, it does not mean that I would qualify every effort and achievement as senseless or useless. And even if I do not believe that merit and achievement have always to be paid for, or have to be rewarded by invidious distinctions, some recognition seems to be necessary. (An entirely different value problem that cannot be treated here is what should be considered as merit or achievement under different social circumstances.)

The distribution of skills shows at the end more or less the same pattern as "cultural uplifting": training in the school, or even at special courses offers only partial solutions because of deeplying social reasons. As long as the division of work and that of the worker coincide, and unemployment and insecurity are endemic to the system, the best vocational training is unable in itself to solve the problems. However, these efforts are certainly not vain since, besides helping to overcome some individual, temporary difficulties, they might trigger off or render possible more far-reaching and more universal changes.

The problems connected with the direct or indirect transmission of ideological contents might be analyzed in by and large the same way. The present-day frame and mechanisms of the school were built up at a time when society accepted, even in its ideology, the legitimacy of

essential social differences and inequalities, rejecting only some of them. Egalitarian convictions actually spreading are certainly opposed to these practices. It is, however, an open question whether it is possible, under the present conditions, to achieve more than superficial reforms, obscuring rather than solving the contradictions. It is e.g. doubtful whether it would be possible to eradicate competition and the handling of knowledge as private property from the school, while these are basic aspects in "real" social life. Or again, it is difficult to introduce into the school new criteria of evaluation while there is a wide social gap between manual and non-manual work.

Questions of this type might be multiplied. But it is time to sum up the crucial points.

Because of social and historical reasons, school- and educational reforms are less successful than expected. Whether we try to bring the child nearer to the culture of the school, or the school nearer to the culture of the child, whether we try to introduce new structures or new mechanisms into the school that do not take into consideration or are even opposed to, prevalent social interrelations, the results remain incomplete. Society proves to be the stronger : either the contents of the reforms are shaped according to the basic social logic, or the results are weakened post festa. All this means that school-reform projects must take into account some, usually more or less neglected factors.

First, it would be important to perform a thorough preliminary analysis of the future projects in order to see how realistic they are under the given mechanisms of the school. The study in appendix e.g. tries to explain how the historical inheritance of the school hindered the strongest efforts towards a more equal distribution of all types of knowledge.

Second, it would be necessary to think about the unwanted, indirect social effects of any reform. Some examples referred to above (e.g. the project of "deschooling" or random selection at the university level), warn us that even the seemingly most radical propositions might lead to pitfalls and might entail consequences that are entirely contrary to the original intentions.

Third, it would be of prime importance to have better knowledge about the interconnections between school and social structure. Former experiences show that the successes of school-reforms are scarce if society does not change. But, on the one hand, there are real results in some cases, and it would be important to know what rendered them possible at all. And, on the other hand, the web of social relations does not form a rigid, immovable set. By means of appropriate strategies, even school might induce some changes, or else, one might use school as a means for directly introducing changes. However, this dialectics is practically unknown, and it is this aspect which is the most-ignored in case of reform-projects.

On the whole, it would be important to know better not only the aims (and that is probably the most difficult problem), but also what is possible to accomplish in any given situation, and what are the tools that would lead us in the direction really sought for.

Notes :

- 1) This process is described in more detail in the paper attached as an appendix, prepared for another meeting of this Congress.
Unfortunately, because of lack of time I was unable to rework it so as to incorporate all the relevant points in the introductory report.
- 2) Jules Henry : On Education. Vintage Books, 1972. p. 22.
- 3) Ch. Baudelot - R. Establet : L'école capitaliste en France. Maspero, 1971.
- 4) That is partly why some programs of recycling, i.e. of changing or modernizing obsolete skills might be more successful: the whole social and economic experience of the trainees is different.
- 5) See e.g.: R. Dugger: The Boom-Town Campus. (The Nation, 13. April 1974.)