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ALEXANDER SUTHERLAND NEILL
(1883–1973)

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The death of A.S. Neill on 23 September 1973 went almost unrecorded in the newspapers, yet it marked the end of the saga of Summerhill, his little school in Suffolk, England, and set the seal on the disregard or even rejection of a man who had come to symbolize a decade of nonconformist fervour.

A radical approach to child rearing (1960), a best-seller in the 1960s, had made Summerhill a centre of avant-garde libertarian education and placed Neill at the very heart of a heated educational controversy. Even when the most indignant protests and accusations of child corruption were being voiced, pupils and visitors flocked to this centre.

This somewhat disturbing enthusiasm met with success, although oddly enough it failed to make Neill famous. Little is generally known of the daily life of the school or of the fact that Summerhill is above all the story of an educator's long-lasting dream, a dream made of generosity, vulnerability and naivety, a dream with which all those involved in education can identify.

The pioneer of the 1920s

When he was discovered in the 1960s, Neill was very soon classed as a disciple of Reich. The two men were indeed very close, but it should not be forgotten that the work of Neill must first be seen in terms of exceptional educational longevity. When he died at the age of 90, Neill had spent most of his life in the classroom: as pupil, as pupil-teacher with his father, as teacher and then as headmaster. Any influences that exist thus go back much earlier in the century. Neill was hardly recognized for what he was, that is, above all the last survivor of the New Education movement that flourished at the turn of the century. Time in any case had already taken its toll of these adventurous years of education, leaving a trace only of the leading figures and passing over the extraordinary proliferation of research discoveries and idealistic theories. From this point of view, the English-speaking branch, where Neill had found his own special place, was by no means the least flourishing.

It is not generally known that in 1920 he ran the review *New Era* with the theosophist Beatrice Ensor, thus becoming a close observer of a wide variety of experiments and achievements and promoting the spread of new ideas, not hesitating to act as an ardent and more than partial propagandist. In those years, Neill was already, in the words of Adolphe Ferrière, the '*enfant terrible* of extremist educational ideas in England' (Ferrière, 1922, p. 384). A reader of Freud, whose ideas he used skillfully to deride his colleagues, a fierce adversary of Maria Montessori, already an eminent educational theorist, whom he accused of having an over-scientific and moralistic approach, Neill sowed the seeds of controversy and provoked 'much indignation and courage' (Hemmings, 1972, p. 57), until his ultimate exclusion from the review. Nor is it widely known that he attended the Calais Congress, where he met Decroly, Ferrière and all the leading pioneers, leaving his mark as the author of avant-garde works.

He became better known after the First World War through the success of his first book *A dominie's log* (1915); but above all he liked to think of himself as the spiritual son of Homer Lane, another figure of the English movement, the founder of the Little Commonwealth, an establishment of young delinquents run on the principle of self-government. Homer Lane, of American origin, had learned to be an educator in the United States at the George Junior Republic. Attacked for his practices, Lane put up a clumsy defence and was forced to leave England. Neill saw in him his first martyr. Reich was to be the second.

Summerhill

Neill opened his first school in 1922 during a journey through Europe, but he founded Summerhill, near Leiston, in England, in 1924. The little school existed for decades without a change. Through some twenty books and countless articles, he related the daily life of the school, never missing an opportunity to provoke argument, repeatedly describing a place in which the adult had not imposed his will, a place for play where total disorder reigned.

A great deal of the damage done to the school was done by the children: 'The wear and tear of materials in Summerhill is a natural process...and if a boy needs a piece of metal for a boat keel, he will use my expensive tools if one of them happens to be about the right size' (1970, p. 13, 34, 130).* Journalists called Summerhill the 'do-as-you-please-school' (Hemmings, 1972, p. 140). Many of the visitors indeed saw the school as 'a Kafkaesque universe with dilapidated and sometimes vandalized buildings'.(Vallotton, 1967, p. 9). Yet the school, with its wooden buildings, its large park and trees, seemed, especially in summer, one of the most pleasant of places, a real country school such as Ferrière dreamed of at the beginning of the century.

In this school, however, lessons were optional. The children could play all day if they so wished, or do handicrafts in the workshop. The evenings were set aside for dancing, theatre and entertainment. If it had not been for the threat of the school being closed by the authorities, Neill would have placed no ban on sexual relations.

Friday evening was set aside for the general assembly. During that meeting, which was chaired by an elected pupil, the children explained their problems and discussed them, working out their own rules. In this assembly, Neill's vote, like that of the other adults, had no greater weight than that of a pupil. This, says Neill, was the secret of the success of an educational technique learnt through contact with Homer Lane.

The originality, the provocation and success of the founder's books were not always sufficient to protect the school from the risk of closure. After the Second World War, there was a dangerous decrease in the number of pupils and the Summerhill Society had to be founded in order to save the school. The education authorities never really accepted it. When they went back on their decision to close the school, some, as Hemmings (1972, p. 241) noted, interpreted this not so much as a mark of recognition as a kind of tolerance of 'a mere relic'. Yet it was this same relic which, several years later, was to prove too small to take in all the pupils and visitors.

The libertarian impulse

Neill was neither a scientist nor a researcher, perhaps a philosopher, but above all a dreamer and idealist. He did not belong to one specific educational or psychological school of thought and he never developed a methodical, well-thought-out approach. His whole work was merely an

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* The references to Neill's writings are indicated by the date of publication and page numbers, referring the reader to the bibliography of Neill's works at the end of the article.

extension of his own personality. Although a prolific writer, what he wrote was often no more than outbursts of enthusiasm, vehement assertions, anecdotes and indignant reactions, but also, it must be admitted, it consisted of over-simplified arguments. He never troubled to present his ideas in a logical sequence nor to ascertain if they corresponded to reality. As Bates Ames (1973, p. 75) put it, 'Neill constructs a theory of how a child thinks, and what he things the child needs, and even when that theory is refuted by all the objective evidence, he still insists on treating children as if they were as he imagined them to be.' In fact Neill, unlike his contemporaries, never approached educational problems in terms of needs but in terms of rights. Even when he borrowed the term of 'self-regulation'.from Reich, it was to say that it meant 'the right of a baby to live freely without outside authority in things psychic and somatic' (1953, p. 42). This explains why the theories of the time were often distorted and were only used as a vehicle for his own ideas. Later in life, he was still surprised to have written for years without having succeeded in clarifying his beliefs and actions.

'Freedom in a school is simply doing what you like so long as you do not spoil the peace of others'—that sums up the principle of freedom which prevailed at Summerhill. Its application in educational terms is simple: 'in psychic health we should impose nothing and in learning we should demand nothing' (1953, p. 103). In fact, Neill's educational project was complete by 1914 before he had ever read a single educational treatise: 'These bairns...have done what they liked...I know that I have brought out all their innate goodness' (1915, p. 151–2). All his books and articles are simply variations on this theme and his contacts were all used first and foremost to confirm that theme rather than enrich it. This principle is the reflection of a true libertarian impulse that came straight from childhood.

The resolute individualist

Neill did not emerge from childhood—one spent in the shadow of Calvin—unscathed. He was long to remember the moments of happiness spoilt by the endless threat of divine retribution, the fear of sin, the fear of dying unshriven. This fear was inculcated less by the church than by family life: 'We were not specifically taught religion; it was in the air...an atmosphere of negation of life' (1972, p. 44). In this large family, between a distant mother and a father who had little esteem for him, the young Alexander did not seem to have found the love he needed, the love he so successfully gave his own pupils.

This childhood turned him into a resolute individualist. 'He was the kind of fellow who would paint his bicycle blue when everyone else's was black' (Hemmings, 1972, p. 3). At school he was indeed a solitary child, a misfit, finding in this his stability, his strength and his weakness. He sought to make his pupils into people who did not passively follow the crowd but were self-reliant, holding their own opinions, capable of self-assertion. His need for independence was not without a certain taste for excess and provocation, laying the stakes on man: 'The one thing that will save the people is individualism...your country needs you...to set it right', he said to each of his pupils in 1915 (1975, p. 101, 120). For the freedom which he offered his pupils aimed at nothing less than making them into people who would live to serve others; 'We want to turn out men and women who will rapidly join the conventional crowd and help it to reach better ideals' (1920, p. 70). This is where education comes into the picture: 'it must help a child to live its cosmic life fully, to live for others, for every human is egocentric, selfish'.(1920, p. 128).

Neill emerged from this childhood with an unquenchable hatred of all religious teaching and any imposition of values, whatever their form. His view of the traditional school with its system of corporal punishment, or the New School based on the Coué method, for example, added fuel to the flames, and if psychoanalysis was ever useful to him it was because it provided him with the means of dissecting it. Neill sought only to appeal to the child's intelligence and spirit of decision. Because he was not a subtle man, his observation of social reality confirmed his view that any attempt at

moralism is motivated by a desire for domination. This aroused his interest in Reich's studies on the psychic structure of the masses shaped by sexual repression. It led to his refusal ever to transmit any value: 'I never attempt to get children to share my beliefs or my prejudices' (1962, p. 224). 'I do not see what right teachers have to force children to adopt what they consider to be in good taste', he would often say. It was a strangely contradictory approach by which Neill glorified education while demonstrating its impossibility.

For Neill, the world was black yet at the heart of this blackness lay the inherent goodness of man. 'The general idea...is the conception that man is a sinner by birth and that he must be trained to be good' (1926, p. 139). For Neill, on the contrary, 'there is not, and never was, 'original sin' (1953, p. 42). Despite some cruel doubts, this faith in man was never to leave him. It balked his attempt to return to the ideas of Freud. That belief brought him near to Reich, for whom man was an 'honest creature, hard-working, co-operative, affectionate'.

Christian feelings

'I am a very religious person; what man brought up in Calvinist Scotland could fail to be?' Neill was often to say. In fact his upbringing instilled in him an exceptionally strong Christian sensitivity. On two occasions Neill wished to become a parson. These feelings were to colour his whole vision of the world and his educational project. They were already present in his first book when, commenting on Nietzsche's ideas, he notes: 'If pity and kindness are wrong, then wrong is right' (1975, p. 108). Neill dreamt of a world governed by love, a love that would establish universal harmony, a world reflecting the message of Christ, the 'original',message, that which was perverted by the evangelists (1916, p. 75). This world would come when man took time to reflect on his own act: 'I think that the foundation of true justice is self-analysis;...in my Utopia, self-examination will be the only examination that will matter' (1975, p. 145-6). This was the message that Neill found again in Homer Lane, who said that each of us is the lover of all mankind and the entire world. Man is constrained to love. If he hates he is expressing love in a negative way. Neill found in this the gospel which he had sought (1980, p. 44) and the experience of the Little Commonwealth was a 'Christ-like experiment to encourage me' (1916, p. 53). It was this same message that Reich sought to transmit and it is well known to what extent he identified with Christ.

To quote Hameline (1985, p. 72), Neill throughout his life 'far from being an immoralist, conducted a constantly pastoral enterprise'. Beyond its disorder, Summerhill was an eminently moral place. Neill had several reasons for writing that his pupils lived ' as honestly and as humanely as any gospel band of Christians' (1939, p. 73).

We can thus see how greatly this man who was accused of corrupting children was misunderstood. Here, however, perhaps lies the reason for his difficulty in explaining his thoughts and acts, bearing as he did a message to which his contemporaries seemed barely sensitive; obliged to seek ways of realizing it outside conventional moral principles; tempted, in order to formulate his message, to use concepts which, taken out of context, only gave it an illusion of scientific precision. Yet Neill had his place among educators like Montessori, Ferrière and Claparède. They all placed their hopes in man and education. All were in their own way libertarians. All, according to Avanzini (1975, p. 131-2), 'nurtured the same hope...that a just and generous world might be attained'.

The attractions of psychoanalysis

Neill endeavoured at first to base his libertarian educational approach on the contributions of psychoanalysis at the very time when Freud's ideas were beginning to penetrate the world of education. A 'fervent psychoanalyst' (Ferrière, 1922, p. 384); he did not hesitate from 1920 onwards to give lectures on this theory, and two years later even undertook the analysis of some of his pupils, on the strength of having just read a few books and having had a number of more than

singular psychological discussions with Homer Lane. Psychoanalysis in its early stages left the door open to many vagaries. In fact, Neill was always a dilettante in this field.

The two books by Freud, the *Interpretation of dreams* and *Psychopathology of everyday life*, provided him with a key to his own behaviour and that of others. He derived amusement from them but above all saw them as a justification for his theory: 'The teacher and the parson are men who hate themselves so much that they must always be preaching. But through the mechanism of protection, they see their faults in the other fellow and proceed to lead him to the binomial theorem or to salvation.' He may then conclude, since he is in the process of analysis: 'I cannot project my faults on to a class of children and I am incapacitated for teaching' (1922, p. 198).

Nevertheless, Neill particularly took up the ideas of traumatism and repression, terms which, when associated with that of childhood, could not fail to acquire an immense power for all-embracing explanation. Neill shared the view of his colleagues: 'The neurotic is a person whose libido or life force is bottled up...the boy who hates algebra and has to work examples is getting no chance whatever [to express himself]' (1920, p. 115). This view confirmed his belief that nature is good. Only education perverts it, that education of which Freud had just shown up the contradictions.

Psychoanalysis makes it possible to reveal this true nature by extending the bounds of introspection, which led Neill to say: 'I firmly believe that Freud's discovery will have a greater influence on the evolution of humanity than any discovery of the last ten centuries' (1920, p. 141). Henceforth, a world governed by love was possible. Was Christ not the man of love, of charity and of justice because he 'knew his own weakness' (1926, p. 171)? Throughout his life, Neill was to repeat that 'we might trace all the futilities, all the stupidities of mankind, all the wars and crimes and injustices to man's ignorance of himself'. Through self-knowledge, man regains that inner peace which heralds universal harmony: 'no happy man ever disturbed a meeting or preached a war or lynched a negro' (1962, p. 15).

Neill very soon ceased to read Freud. He found the concept of man as presented through psychoanalysis difficult to accept. He never refused to speak of libido, but that libido was too much threatened by what Ferrière (1922, p. 220) had called the 'dark cave' for him not to yield, like many others, to the attractions of the Jungian 'life impulse' through which the basic goodness of human nature could unfurl, with all its promise for the future. 'Freud believes in original sin' (1920, p. 24). For Neill, the life impulse very soon assumed the innocence of a 'desexualized libido' (Bigeault, 1978, p. 53) and his 'theory of sexuality...although unbridled, has nothing erotic or roguish about it...it has the crystal clarity of pure pleasure' (Mazure, 1980, p. 53). Neill simultaneously rejected the whole Freudian theory on the structure of the personality and was never to admit the existence of the Oedipus complex. Reich did not contradict him.

The doctrine of interest

Neill also based his arguments on the doctrine of interest, a key concept in the educational theories of the time. Interest was the psychological basis of the New Education movement. According to Ferrière (1922, p. 229), 'it is the lever which moves mountains...the keystone of the Active School'. Neill proclaimed its virtues: 'interest is the only criterion' (1922, p. 229). The similarity stops here, because although for Ferrière (1922, p. 230) 'only interest which is capable of stimulating and sustaining effort deserves the name of interest', for Neill the concept was simple and devoid of ambiguity: 'When a boy makes a snowball, he is interested. [...] I don't care what a child is doing in the way of creation, whether he is making tables, porridge or sketches [...] or snowballs [...] there is more true education in making a snowball than in listening to an hour's lecture on grammar' (1920, p. 13-14).

There is no doubt that it was his forays into Freudian ideas that made him so sure of himself. Claparède had proposed merging interest and libido in a single concept. Neill for his part

merged the two approaches with easy assurance—the approach of the psychoanalyst on the one hand and that of the educator on the other. 'The child's interest [...] is simply what he can do with all his infinite life energy' (1922, p. 229); 'interest is the life force of the whole personality' (1926, p. 152).

The waning of interest

From the educational to the psychological, the circle gradually closes. 'The aim of education is to allow emotional release so that there will be no bottling up and no future neurosis, and this release comes through interest' (1920, p. 114–15). Henceforth the teacher's work is simple: 'to find out where a child's interest lies and to help him to live it out'; 'my pupils never go to a lesson, it takes such faith and patience to realize that they are doing the right thing' (1945, p. 145).

It is not surprising in this context that Neill demanded the withdrawal of the educator, through whom traumatism could occur. He took up here a theme in fashion at the time, that of the comrade-teacher. Ferrière himself did not fail to praise 'the faculty of spontaneously formed social bodies...to bring children after a period of anarchy...to establish order and discipline....No adult seeking to impose his authority could ever obtain what the spirit of the beehive achieves spontaneously' (Ferrière, 1950, p. 32). What in Ferrière was primarily an appeal to a silent presence soon became in Neill something like an appeal to regression. He had, as Lane had moreover taught him, to be 'one of the boys'. It should be noted that Lane, on at least one occasion, joined in quite cheerfully with the children in damaging his own school.

Thus ends this amazing balancing act between two theories which, once more after Rousseau, hold that nature is the best educator and reduce the educator to the role of preserving nature's slow but sure work. For Neill had no doubt that, through successive interests, the child was moving towards good. Without being asked to, he would learn, since it was in his nature to do so. This was to become the principle of free study. This natural harmonious development took in all aspects of the child's personality.

A different reality

It is a strange faculty that education has, to be able to stimulate and encourage the development of such a theory, charged with so much nostalgia and so many healing projects. One can see here all Neill's passion and obstinacy, and especially his solitude, even though he was so deeply rooted in the educational trends of the period, which he caricatured. It is a theory which daily practical reality at Summerhill never succeeded in refuting. In fact, the project was designed for uninhibited, self-regulated children, but the school never had occasion to take in such children. Life at Summerhill in fact fell far short of the picture painted of it by its headmaster.

Neill's project in its simplicity calls for a few elementary reminders. We know, as Freud emphasized, that the child must learn to control his instincts and adapt to his social environment and that education must to a large extent teach him to do this. The basic human experience is in fact the experience of frustration. We also know that if the child is to develop a strong ego (which Neill sought to achieve), he needs to make contact with personalities capable both of firmness and affection, who encourage this subtle interplay of love and agressivity through which the ego is formed.

Curiously enough, in this place—the school—from which theoretically he should be excluded, the adult plays an important role, especially Neill, whose open-mindedness, human warmth, enthusiasm, opportunism and humour were familiar to each pupil. The great freedom he granted his pupils and the trust he placed in them gained him even more respect in their eyes. Each pupil knew that, if necessary, Neill readily took firm action and imposed

prohibitions in order to protect the child and the group. Every pupil knew that he was the headmaster and could expel them.Bruno Bettelheim (1972, p. 103-4) was right when he said:

> Neill remains unaware of why the things he does work [...] he does not face the fact that all is due to how the pupils identify with him. He does not realize that Summerhill works not because it is just the right setting in which to raise children, but because it is nothing but an extension of his personality. Everything about it expresses Neill [...] what he stands for and lives for. Everywhere there is the powerful impact of his person [...] and sooner or later most children come to identify with him, however reluctantly. He is simply one of the grandest men around.

As Mauco (1971, p. 154) points out, on account of the large number of pupils, a 'group idea may emerge and stimulate a tendency to identification'.

It is certainly this ability to be present which explains Neill's educational genius, and in this his experiment deserves consideration, even if there is a singular lack of instruments by which to examine it. Without reservations, Neill certainly loved his pupils and stood by them. This was a hazardous undertaking that often made trainee teachers an easy prey for groups of pupils. On this point Neill learnt from his experience. At the heyday of the appeal to regression and the theory that pupils should be allowed to live out their interests, he faced the phenomenon of aggressivity and learned to hear the child's demands in all their ambiguity. He learned how to respond. For at Summerhill, relations moved rapidly towards therapeutic activity and the pupils could have psychological discussions if they so wished. Open-minded, observant, intuitive, playing on humour and the impact of the unexpected, Neill 'draws the pupil out of a lie in which he has got lost' (Mannoni, 1970, p. 11–12). Better still, it was in everyday things, through a chance meeting, that a word or a sentence could help the child.

Because he had this ability to be present, Neill could recommend that the educational setting should be reduced to a minimum. Prohibitions did of course exist and the child was faced with a set of rules, many of which were the result of group decisions. Their existence did not fail to strike visitors. In that respect, however, Neill pushed the limits back as far as possible. That did not mean, incidentally, that life at Summerhill was easy. Bettelheim (1972, p. 108-9) noted:

> While such an educational setting imposes few specific demands, though never trivial ones, it is really among the most demanding of educational institutions. Because such a setting demands of the child that he develop a very high degree of self-respect; and with it true respect for others. This is much harder to learn than how to automatically get to class at 9 o'clock.

From this point of view, the self-government that prevailed throughout the life of the school proved to be a factor in personal development and socialization. It was, in fact, one of the most valuable yet most neglected contributions of New Education that Summerhill passed on to us.

Neill never ceased to marvel at it. Throughout his life he saw his pupils daring to speak out, to express opinions, to defend an idea, moving gradually from selfishness to co-operation, showing loyalty towards the group, developing a high sense of justice. As for the role of adults and of Neill himself, no one was ever taken in by this. A few mischievous remarks, a few humourous comments, were often enough to guide the debate and Neill never hesitated to intervene more firmly in order to protect the group from regression. After all, before becoming a harmonious unit, a group often experiences phenomena which children or adolescents could hardly be expected to control. There is no doubt that thanks to Neill, this group life led to conclusions in which each could acquire a knowledge of himself and of others.

Perhaps Neill thus succeeded in bringing about inner peace. Vallotton (1976, p. 11) was indeed 'astonished at the truth and clarity in the pupil's looks and conversation'.

That was his success. Free study was his failure. In fact he was never really interested in teaching as such. The methods were left to the discretion of the teachers and were chiefly acknowledged to be traditional.

Between dream and reality

Here, then, is Summerhill reduced to its human dimension, with all its richness on the one hand and its vulnerability and shortcomings on the other, for there is no lack of reservations on the subject. In the 1960s, there was much questioning of the consistency of Neill's thinking but also and above all of the revolutionary significance of the project. On this last point, Snyders (1974), for example, never doubted that a purely psychological approach to social problems, such silence from the teacher, such a breach between the school and the outside world, could only lead to the narrowest conservatism. These reservations turned into rejection when it was seen that the school existed primarily by taking in children whose social background meant that schooling was not a great concern, and above all because of the charisma of its founder. This was a reality which Neill, too involved in explaining his educational views, endeavouring to reconcile his beliefs and his actions, would not have wished to admit, leaving the critics to sweep away everything of value that the venture had produced.

This was the creation of a place where the child felt loved, respected and understood. In his own way and to some extent despite himself, Neill rehabilitated the educator, that controversial character on the educational scene, which the fierce individualism of our times has struck out of the educational treatises,as if it still needed to be proved that educational success depends largely on the personality of the teacher, his enthusiasm and commitment. There again, Neill passes on to us something of the 1920s, something of their invigorating eccentricity.

Strangely enough, however, it was by blindly following his own path that Neill sustained enthusiasm, and above all his own. Throughout his life, like Lane and Reich, he had an immense admiration for Christ, and felt imbued with a mission. After the Second World War, he even thought that Summerhill was becoming the birthplace of a new civilization. He also sustained enthusiasm in others. At a time when all values were being questioned, there were many who, unaware of the reality of the school, saw in Summerhill an alternative that corresponded to their hopes. Summerhill was, and will long remain, a mythical place where, at one time, a world of love and harmony came into being.

Notes

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