Homeschooling in the USA: Past, Present and Future

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The Homeschooling Movement, Past, Present, and Future
Abstract: This article first examines why the homeschooling movement emerged in the 1970s, noting the impact of political radicalism both right and left, feminism, suburbanization, and public school bureaucratization and secularization. It then describes how the movement, constituted of left and right wing elements, collaborated in the early 1980s to contest hostile legal climates in many states but was taken over by conservative Protestants by the late 1980s because of their superior organization and numerical dominance. Despite internal conflicts, the movement’s goals of legalizing and popularizing homeschooling were realized by the mid 1990s. Since that time homeschooling has grown in popularity and is increasingly being utilized by more mainstream elements of society, often in conjunction with public schools, suggesting that “homeschooling” as a political movement and ideology may have run its course.

Keywords: Homeschooling, History, Movement,
Americans have been using their homes as educational space from colonial times to the present. Yet there is a key difference between the domestic education of past centuries and the homeschooling movement that emerged in the 1970s and has grown steadily ever since. The home-based education of the past was nearly always done for pragmatic reasons. Sparse population and limited resources meant that formal schools were impracticable for many in colonial America or on the western frontiers of the 19th century. Laws criminalizing schooling for slaves drove many African Americans to clandestine learning behind closed doors. Women and lower-class men who could not gain admittance to colleges enrolled in correspondence programs by the millions. Missionaries, diplomats, and world travelers with children relied on mail-ordered curriculum to keep their children up to par while they were in the field. These are but a few examples of the many ways the home was called upon, and in some cases still is, to fill in for formal schools when necessary. But this is not homeschooling. (Gaither, 2008, 7-81)

In this article I would like to define the compound word “homeschooling” more narrowly. Here it will stand only for the use of the home to educate as a deliberate act of political protest against and alternative to formal educational institutions. Though one can find examples of isolated individuals rejecting institutional schooling in earlier decades, the 1970s saw for the first time the emergence of a movement of parents who kept their children out of schools not by necessity but by design. Why did they do so? Why did “homeschooling” happen?

The answer to that question raises other questions, for, as we shall see, Americans of widely different political orientations came to the same conclusion about homeschooling at about the same time. How did this happen? And what did it mean for the movement to have such
profound ideological diversity among its members? How did such diversity affect the movement’s aims and achievements?

Finally, as we shall see, the movement’s primary aims, that of connecting homeschoolers and making homeschooling clearly legal and socially acceptable, were for the most part accomplished by the mid-1990s. What does the movement’s success suggest about its future? I will end this essay by discussing whether “homeschooling” might at present be morphing into something more like the home education of the past, where families employ it less for ideological reasons and more because it simply makes sense given their situations.

I. Why Homeschooling Happened

Several broad social trends of the second half of the twentieth century conspired to make the homeschooling movement possible. Here I would like to discuss four: suburbanization, feminism, political radicalism and privativism, and the increasingly bureaucratic and secularized public school system.

Suburbanization

The family farm had been in decline for decades by the 1970s, killed off by mechanization. The invention of the combustion engine led to the tractor and other labor-saving devices that transformed agriculture. In 1900, 32 percent of the population still farmed. By 1980 just 3 percent of Americans lived on farms. The automobile eviscerated the city as well. It made city streets less pedestrian-friendly and far more congested. More profoundly, it gave people a way out. Henry Ford, architect of the revolution, predicted, “the city is doomed. We shall solve the city problem by leaving the city.” (Jackson, 1985: 173-175)

And We did. Earlier suburbanization had occurred along rail lines, with settlement extending in thin tendrils out to the countryside. But the automobile opened up vast new tracts
of land for development, allowing homes to be built far from public transport. By 1955, sixty-three million Americans owned cars, and government rushed to build roads for them. In the 1920s a coalition of pressure groups—tire and auto parts manufacturers and suppliers, oil companies, service station owners, road builders, and land developers—successfully petitioned local governments to finance roads not by tolls but by general taxation. By 1929 every State in the Union had a gas tax to underwrite its road building. The “road gang” also succeeded in getting the federal government involved: the 1921 Federal Road Act provided matching federal funds for important local roads and began planning an interstate highway system; the 1944 Federal Highway Act raised the federal contribution to 60 percent and expanded road eligibility for funding; and in 1956 President Eisenhower signed the Interstate Highway Act, ostensibly as a national defense measure, but in actuality a massive pork barrel project providing 90 percent of interstate highway money but giving States freedom to design and locate them as they pleased. This infrastructure quite literally paved the way for mass suburbanization, especially after World War II. 937,000 new homes were built in 1946. By 1950 over 1.5 million new homes were being built a year. By 1980 over 40 percent of the population, more than 100 million people, lived in suburbia. (Jackson, 1985: 162-168, 233, 4) (Hayden, 2003: 165-167)

Government subsidies did not stop with road construction. The Federal Housing Administration and the Veteran’s Administration (created in 1944) provided mortgage guarantees on new home purchases, allowing developers to build and sell at will, confident that the Fed would bail out anyone who couldn’t pay. Developers also received huge tax breaks for such commercial projects as strip malls, fast food restaurants, industrial parks, and gas stations. Government underwrote sewerage, zoned undesirable public housing away from suburbs, gave developers virtual free reign over land use, located job-rich Department of Defense sites in
outlying areas, and drafted income tax laws allowing deductions for mortgage interest and property taxes. As one historian has put it, “Sprawl became the national housing policy.” Given such extravagant government largesse, it is little wonder that few middle class Americans during the 1950s and early 1960s expressed concerns about “tax and spend” liberal programs, and it makes the subsequent libertarianism that has typified so much of later suburban politics more than a bit ironic. (Jackson, 1985, 233, 293-95) (Hayden, 2003: 163-164)

Suburban homes have grown ever bigger and more comfortable since the 1950s. According to the National Association of Home Builders, the average house size increased 15% in the 1970s and another 21% in the 1980s. The median size of a new home in 2002 was 20 percent larger than in 1987. As people have invested more and more in the interior space that situates their private lives, it has seemed natural to shift energy away from public space. We see this in the degradation of public architecture, as civic and educational buildings are decentered from any sort of prominent place and designed to look just like the shopping malls, warehouses, and megachurches that dot the suburban landscape. The comfortable, technology-rich interior spaces of suburban homes (along with the traffic and ugliness of the outside environment) have made homeschooling a far more compelling option for many. (Mandel, 1995: 26) (Samuelson, 2004: 22-23)

**Feminism**

This mass movement toward suburban life impacted American women in many ways. Much has been written and said about the fate of suburban women, a good bit of it in response to Betty Friedan’s famous *Feminine Mystique*, first published in 1963. In that work Friedan argued that suburban life served as a sort of comfortable concentration camp for women, segregating them inside the walls of domestic bliss from adult conversation, meaningful work, and political
involvement. Friedan’s critique joined with a host of other works in the 1960s and after that have consistently portrayed postwar suburbia as a “smug and phony world.” Yet more recent historians have uncovered a very different 1950s. While many women did express concern over “cultural isolation,” especially given their separation from extended family, postwar suburban women on the whole were far more engaged civically than the stereotype would allow. The suburban home was often the springboard for aggressive political involvement. Women organized locally to fight smut, to promote or hinder integration, to defeat communism, to add a traffic light here or change zoning laws there. They were particularly enervated by school-related issues. In many respects conflicts between parents and school officials in the 1950s “set the stage for the residents’ negative reaction toward the integration plans” that were to come later. Many postwar suburban women began to feel a “growing disenchantment with the state” even before the events we think of as “the 1960s” happened. (Filene, 1998: 198) (Meyerowitz, 1996: 9-36) (Lynn, 1994: 103-127) (Nickerson, 2003: 35-43) (Murray 2003: 12)

Women’s roles were changing too. Women’s employment outside the home had been increasing slowly in the decades before World War II. After the war more and more women, especially married women, went to work. Each decade between 1940 and 1990 saw a 10 percent increase in the percentage of married women in the work force. By 1960 three times as many wives were working than had been in 1940. By 1985, 50 percent of women with children under six were in the work force. Such shifts correlated with ever increasing levels of education among American women. By 1960 one third of all higher education degrees in the U.S. were awarded to women. By 1980 almost half were. The number of women earning Bachelor’s degrees between these years more than tripled. (Blackwelder, 1997) (Bailey, 2004: 108) (USNCES, 2008).
The homeschooling movement cannot be understood apart from the dramatic rise in female education and political participation that the feminist movement has secured. Though many, perhaps most, homeschooling mothers would utterly reject the term “feminist” as a self-designation, it is clear that such women “no longer see themselves as simply housewives or mothers.” Homeschooling has become a means for women who for religious reasons believe they should stay at home to nevertheless put their educational experience and talents to good use. Home has become workplace; the mother an educational professional. In addition, fathers with homeschooling wives are urged to and often do become more domesticated. Homeschooled boys learn to cook, clean, and take care of younger siblings. Children in general are raised with less gender specificity. Some scholars studying homeschooling have noted how a movement “generated partly in reaction to feminism” has nevertheless selectively incorporated “many feminist family forms,” including the softening and domestication of the male, the therapeutic orientation to marriage and childrearing, and of course the provision of excellent education to girls. Women form “the backbone of the homeschool movement’s impressive organizational system,” crafting lives of powerful dissent from established norms even as they seek to convince others that homeschooling is, after all, pretty normal. (McDannell, 2005: 210-211) (Stacey, 1990: 145) (Stevens, 2001: 15-16)

Political Radicalism and Privativism

Since the 1980s commentators have been much exercised over the division of the country into warring camps on most social issues. But what is often missed in such an analysis is the underlying symmetry of vision both camps tend to possess. The cultural left and right may argue incessantly, but they speak the same language, share a similar set of background beliefs. Since the 1960s Americans on both sides of the political spectrum have been more interested in local community and self-determination than in national identity. Historian David Farber has shown how “calls for a more direct
democracy built on local control and community right to self-determination” came in the 1960s “from Black Power activists, Chicano militants, white southerners, and white urban ethnic blocs.” Conservative and liberal Americans had radically different private visions of the good life, but they all shared a commitment to private vision. “Conservative” churches, for example, were anything but conservative in their celebration of private, direct experience of God and their appropriation of counter-cultural music and hairstyles. Everybody waxed apocalyptic, whether they were Christians discerning Antichrist’s imminent arrival in the latest headlines or hippies predicting an environmental holocaust. Both groups saw themselves as the small faithful remnant surrounded on all sides by the forces of darkness. By the 1970s young Americans on both the left and the right had largely given up on building a better America, hoping instead to “build alternative institutions and create alternative families—a separate, authentic, parallel universe.” (Schulman, *The Seventies*, 246-252, 77, 16-17) (Farber, “Democratic Subjects,” 8-9) (Steigerwald, *The Sixties*, 277).

Given this pan-ideological commitment to local, authentic, private life and contempt for establishment liberalism, it is not surprising that members of both the countercultural right and the countercultural left began to practice and advocate for homeschooling. On the left, disillusionment with the pace of social change prompted many to drop out of mainstream America. Many turned instead to communal living or to homesteading. By the early 1970s there were some 2000 rural communes in existence and perhaps as many as 5000 less organized “collectives,” ranging from urban villages to more informal “crash pads” where anyone was welcome to a couch or space on the floor. Though the rhetoric of such groups was profoundly counter-cultural, the agrarian and do-it-yourself spirit pervading this movement was classic populist Americana. Family and childbearing were big parts of the organic, earthy vibe, and natural childbirth often morphed into permissive parenting and education. For many on the left, formal schools were symbols of everything wrong and destructive in modern life, so many of them embraced homeschooling. They found a champion and organizer in the person of John Holt, a leading
school critic of the 1960s who by the 1970s had given up on schools entirely and was urging parents to, in the words of his most important book on homeschooling, *Teach Your Own*. Holt’s magazine *Growing Without Schooling* became the first national homeschooling periodical when it debuted in August of 1977, and his celebrity advocacy and frequent appearances on *The Phil Donahue Show* and other venues brought homeschooling into the national limelight for the first time. (Schulman, *The Seventies*, 88-91) (Miller, *Sixties Communes*, 1999) (Gaither, *Homeschool*, 122-128)

On the Right,
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