

A NEW AGE PHILOSOPHY

A call to bring back child labour? Don't worry, there is a twist: introducing youngsters to the workforce could be the next milestone on the route to a more functional and mature society, says this issue's soapbox-climber.

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by **nick scott**

There are times when a simple monosyllabic question — “Why?” — has the power to scythe down the towering triflids of widely accepted but fundamentally flawed precepts. In late 2013, in the wake of a major British supermarket chain being caught selling beef burgers that were found to contain horsemeat, the consensus among the pub-table-slapping public was unanimous: “While consuming the flesh of a cow, chicken or pig is perfectly acceptable, eating that of a horse is spiritually, gastronomically and morally unpalatable.” Stop these indignant pundits in their tracks and pose that simple question — “Why?” — and you'd receive a look of aggressive incredulity that made you feel like Galileo gazing into the glowering eyeballs of the Inquisition.

There are many more of these universally held notions that enjoy the privilege of unimpeded acceptance despite being utterly fallacious: that criminalisation protects society from dangerous narcotics; that long-term monogamy is the default option for all functional adults; that airplanes and airports are far more vulnerable to acts of international terrorism than trains, stadiums or nuclear power stations. And, perhaps one of the most deeply ingrained of these undeservedly irrefutable truisms — one that can't be contested without prompting gasps of horror from the chattering classes — is the idea that it is intrinsically amiss for people of minor age to contribute to the functioning of society with manual or intellectual labour.

Now, first things first: I'm not advocating rows of emaciated orphans in urban slums, crushing horse bones to make fertiliser, as depicted in Charles Dickens's damning treatments of Victorian hardship. Neither am I defending the atrocious anachronism whereby modern consumables are assembled by minors in impoverished parts of the globe in conditions at which *Oliver Twist* would have turned up his nose (even the workhouses of Dickens's grim imaginings didn't have suicide nets suspended beneath the windows).

But it's obvious, surely, to anyone with a functioning moral compass that it would be inherently evil to subject adults to compulsory toil in life-threatening conditions too? Forced labour is a crime against humanity, as are unpleasant and dangerous working conditions — but the work in question being carried out by those who have not yet reached adulthood? I'm not so sure.

As research for her book *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution*, Jane Humphries, a professor of economic history at the University of Oxford, studied hundreds of memoirs of children who shed sweat and tears during the period when the advance of manufacturing

processes sent the western world's standard of living rocketing and catalysed a period of sustained growth that has never dwindled. “One of the recurring images in these working class autobiographies is the pride that children experience in working,” she later said, “and in particular the enormous sense of achievement they get when they are able to contribute to their mothers' and their siblings' standard of living.”

Moreover, when the second world war effort saw men called to the front line and women to Britain's industrial facilities, children took on huge amounts of domestic labour, such as tending farms and fields at harvest time (this was a period when German U-boats were sinking any ships carrying food imports to Britain), and all anecdotal evidence suggests that they thrived on fulfilling that war-time obligation of 'doing one's bit'. Those still alive assert that the experience equipped them with invaluable practical skills and a healthy, industrious attitude to life that have never deserted them.

I, in particular, would have benefited from child labour. I spent my school days gazing out of windows, scouring the sky for cumulonimbus that might fuel my yonic fantasies, while exceptionally learned people stood in front of me fruitlessly attempting to share theories, narratives and natural phenomena so fascinating that they would, later in life, compel me to become a devoted autodidact. Still effectively an adolescent well into my early twenties, I spent my university years attempting to bring about yonic realities by strumming odes to misery on a Clapped-Out Fender to spliffed-up Mancunian convent school dropouts.

What I'm saying is, I can firmly attest to the notion that education is wasted on the young. The British government spends about £92 billion (\$141bn) on education funding annually (and that doesn't include money spent on private schooling); the United States spends about \$550bn a year. In both countries, the vast majority of students are so unengaged that vast numbers of teachers are effectively being forced to act as quasi social workers, rather than doing what they're best at: imparting knowledge in their fields of expertise. No wonder so many start out hoping to foster healthily inquisitive mindsets only to end up resorting to force fed indoctrination.

In fact, it's not just education but childhood itself that's wasted on children. As beneficiaries of unconditionally bequeathed, shackle-free lives of leisure, how do today's under 18s utilise that abundant, worry-free time? Devouring cultural anti-matter, purloining each other's smartphones



ILLUSTRATION: LEE SULLIVAN.

and crushing animated confectionary using tablets assembled by less fortuitous children their age. Most well-adjusted adults, emancipated from the relentless pursuit of income, would spend their abundant spare time learning, loving and enlightening each other's lives with hearty, congenial social interaction.

What I propose, therefore, is that children enter the workforce at the age of five. I'm thinking light labour, administrative tasks, some interpersonal professional endeavours for the brighter ones (imagine what they could learn about the human condition, and the deceitful machinations of the modern world, working in call centres). Paid a modest salary and pension fund contributions for the next 20 years, and taxed at the going rate, they then get to enjoy a lengthy hiatus — a kind of existential siesta that lasts two decades — during which they juggle a first-class, part-time education with personal lives packed with sybaritic decadence. Around their mid forties, abundantly educated and with their memories of being functionally and gainfully employed still fresh, they re-join the workforce, taking up senior positions and saving capital for their second bout of

retirement in their mid sixties — at which we return to the current model.

What, exactly, is inhumane about this proposition? Why is the notion of putting our younger denizens through the edifying, character-building, economy-bolstering experience of toiling for the greater good doomed for the foreseeable future to remain a hypothetical proposition made by cantankerous men's magazine writers? It comes down to an ancient anthropological concept: taboo — an ugly ideological tank that has, in recent years, parked itself in front of areas of human progress from stem cell research to progressive gay rights legislation.

I don't expect my proposition ever to come into force: the democratic world is too enslaved by four-year terms of government to think about the long term. Perhaps, though, if we're going to confine children to the developmental quarantine of the school premises, we can at least teach them independence of thought above all other values, in the hope that generations to come will be more liberal in their use of that simple but devastatingly effective one-word question: “Why?”