

'The Relevance of the Peckham Experiment in the 21st Century'

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**'The path not taken':<sup>1</sup> self-government, community and the 'freedom' school<sup>2</sup> at the Peckham Health Centre (1935-1950)**

***Introduction***

'The path not taken' is the title of an article written in 1987 by Colin Ward who died in February 2010: he was 'Britain's most famous anarchist'<sup>3</sup> and a strong advocate of the Peckham Health Centre. The article described and deplored how authoritarian, top-down, state provision of social services has prevailed over a tradition of bottom-up, working-class, 'self-help' and 'mutual aid'.<sup>4</sup> This essay is an historical account of the Peckham Health Centre which explores how far it should be understood as part of this 'path', what it reveals about why this 'path' has not been more widely taken, and what it offers to contemporary debates about the path we could take in the future. This essay uses the Centre school (1947-1950) as a lens through which to explore these questions. These questions are urgent in a paradigm which assumes: that people are in need of constant supervision; that freedom leads to chaos; that order relies on tougher discipline, rewards and punishment; that 'free schools' are the preserve of middle-class 'yummy

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<sup>1</sup> C. Ward, 'The Path Not Taken', *The Raven, Anarchist Quarterly*. 1:3 ( November 1987), 195.

<sup>2</sup> From the oral testimony of an ex-member, cited in A. Stallibrass, 'Child development and education – the contribution of the Peckham Experiment', *Nutrition and Health*. 1 (1982), 45-52.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Ward Obituary in The Guardian: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/feb/22/colin-ward-obituary>.

<sup>4</sup> C. Ward, 'The Path Not Taken', in *The Raven, Anarchist Quarterly*. 1:3 (November 1987), 195.

mummies';<sup>5</sup> that working-class families need the state to tell them how to educate their children.

This essay draws on published work about the Centre by its founders (Scott Williamson and Innes Pearse) and other supporters of the Centre.<sup>6</sup> It also draws on primary, documentary evidence (held at the Wellcome Institute) and oral testimony (partly from interviews conducted by the author and partly from cassettes held at the Wellcome Institute). It was impossible not to be moved by the passion and commitment which the Centre and its ideas continue to inspire. At the same time, I found that I was curious to hear the other sides of the story, the 'battle' which lies behind the certainty of these accounts. Therefore, while acknowledging my attraction to the Centre's alternative values and practices, I retain a determination to seek out, what the social historian Thompson has called, the 'original multiplicity of standpoints'<sup>7</sup> and apply Skinner's, rigorously historical approach to those standpoints, 'with a willingness to listen and a commitment to trying to see things their way'.<sup>8</sup> This involves interpreting all the sources, 'within such intellectual contexts as enable us to make sense of what their authors were doing';<sup>9</sup> these 'authors' are taken to be multiple - not only the founders and the staff, but also the families who used the Centre; the 'intellectual contexts' are taken to be educational, scientific, cultural and political.

### ***'Run by the people'<sup>10</sup> - was the Centre on the 'path not taken'?***

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<sup>5</sup> Fiona Millar in *The Guardian*, Tuesday 13 July 2010, 2.

<sup>6</sup> A. Stallibrass, *Being Me and Also Us* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1989), F. Donaldson, *Child of the Twenties* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959).

<sup>7</sup> P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Group interview with the Watsons, Wellcome Archives SA/PHC/H3/4.

Scott Williamson's remark in a speech to the London Anarchist Group that 'I was the only person with authority, and I used it to stop anyone exerting any authority'<sup>11</sup> encapsulates some of the contradictions which characterised the power dynamics at the Centre. Anarchist and supporter accounts have often failed to acknowledge the autocratic and socially conservative aspects of the Centre. This section explores these contradictions through an historical analysis of how far the Centre school (1947-1950) was really 'run by the people'.<sup>12</sup>

Anarchist accounts have extolled the Centre school (1947-1950) as an example of how the Centre community was characterised by self-organisation and mutualism, citing how it was set up in response to parents 'petition[ing] for their own Centre school'.<sup>13</sup> Founder accounts also emphasise that the school was 'governed by the parents'<sup>14</sup> through a committee and that parents were heavily involved in its day-to-day life. According to an article in the progressive education journal, *New Era*, 'the Director felt herself to be very much in the hands of the parents'.<sup>15</sup>

There are no testimonies to suggest that the parents explicitly defined their behaviour as an act of 'class resistance and hostility towards state coercion', of the kind described by Humphries, author of *Hooligans or Rebels* (1981).<sup>16</sup> However, the action of working-class parents rejecting the free state provision, to which they would have been entitled, and setting up an alternative school for which they were willing to pay, situates the school as a post-script to the tradition of private working-class schools which flourished

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<sup>11</sup> *Freedom*, 11 March 1950, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Group interview with the Watsons, Wellcome Archives SA/PHC/H3/4.

<sup>13</sup> Williamson and Pearse, *The Passing of Peckham*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Williamson and Pearse, *The Passing of Peckham*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Dawson, 'Pioneer Health Centre at Peckham' *New Era*. 31/4 (May 1950), 78.

<sup>16</sup> S. Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels: An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth 1889-1939* (Oxford : Blackwell, 1981), 23.

in the nineteenth century. Gardner has rescued this tradition from the scrap heap of educational history, which has either ignored them or rejected them as 'baby-minding establishments'.<sup>17</sup> Instead, Gardner presents these 'people's schools' as a positive alternative to the dominant paradigm of state provision, as an 'education that was fully under the control of its users ... an education truly of the working class and not "for" it'. Many of the features which Gardner claims characterised these schools, are shared with the Centre school: involvement of untrained and familial adults, a relatively free and easy approach to discipline, rarely held in purpose-built schools, small, less segregation by age, sex or ability, teaching and learning on an informal basis, self-financing.<sup>18</sup>

However, there is also evidence that the school cannot be described as 'fully' under the control of the families involved. Williamson and Pearse (or 'the biologists' as they were known by members) championed the idea of parents' taking responsibility. However, in practice, they continued to hold the reins tightly. Although the parents initiated its setting up, the Biologists had been thinking of such an experiment earlier, as indicated in *The Peckham Experiment's* Appendix 1, 'Plans for the First Steps in an Educational Experiment'. The fact that their approval had to be sought, is a reminder that the Centre was governed by the Biologists rather than the 'people', since there were no members on the overall Centre governing committee. The existence of the school committee meetings suggests high levels of parental involvement. However, the content and tone of the minutes from these meetings reinforce the sense that Williamson remained firmly in control, with parents making suggestions or requests rather than leading or making decisions.<sup>19</sup> The Biologists continued to hold responsibility for what went on in the school

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<sup>17</sup> B. Simon, cited in P.Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England: The People's Education* (London : Croom Helm, 1984), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> School-Parent Meeting 8 January 1948, Wellcome Archives SA/PHC/B.5/6, 7.

and its impact on the children. For example, Williamson is quoted as saying that 'the one thing I have to guard against is doing harm to your children'. The use of 'I' in this context reveals his assumption that responsibility lies with him rather than the parents.

This contradictory tendency is reflected in the Biologists' wider attitudes towards the members. On the one hand they held an empowering view of parents as responsible for and the natural source of the child's development, but on the other hand they undermined that power by criticising the home as 'no longer an environment conducive to natural child development'<sup>20</sup> and emphasising that 'the starting point of all education is parent education'.<sup>21</sup> It is also reinforced by the way in which members and staff refer to the Biologists warmly as 'one of us' and in the next breath 'it was wonderful the way they looked after us and studied us'.<sup>22</sup> Adult members and staff frequently represent the relationship between themselves and the Biologists as one of child to parent; for example, a member recalls how 'Doctor' as spoken by a member was the sound of someone saying "mother" or "father".<sup>23</sup> In some ways, the Biologists deconstructed the idea of external authorities, such as a 'teacher' and 'leaders' but constructed their own authority as the 'ones with the answers'.<sup>24</sup> Their 'answers' had their own 'moral bias' relating to their ideas about freedom and community, despite the Biologists' claim to the contrary.<sup>25</sup>

These tensions reflect the wider political, social and educational culture in London in this period; for example, Shorter, historian of science, has described the 'enormous prestige

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<sup>20</sup> Pearse and Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment*, 182.

<sup>21</sup> Williamson, lecture to Institute of Education students on 1945-9 *Biology and the Elements of Education*, Wellcome Archives SA/PHC/D3.

<sup>22</sup> Group interview with the Watsons, Wellcome Archives SA/PHC/H3/4.

<sup>23</sup> Elsie Purser, cited in Stallibrass, *Being Me and Also Us*, 158.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Dorothy Batten conducted by Emily Charkin on 22 April 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Williamson, Lecture to the Institute of Education students, *Biology and the Elements of Science* (between 1945-9), Wellcome Archives SA/PHC/D3/5, 2.

of the physician in the eyes of the patient'<sup>26</sup>; feminist historian, Steedman, has shown how Margaret MacMillan, part of the socialist movement in South London, was at the same time a champion of working-class children, while also reinforcing a deprivation theory which condemned their parents for their 'sorry lack of ambition' and their homes in Deptford as the 'dark area';<sup>27</sup> the social historian, Koven, has described how the attitudes of the founders of the Settlement Houses (communities set up in the South and East End of London by university men and women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in response to the perceived problems of the urban poor) was a 'messy mingling of good intentions and blinkered prejudices.'<sup>28</sup>

However, the relationship between Biologists and members, can also be distinguished from these manifestations of class condescension. The Biologists did not seek to use education, as Macmillan, to 'redeem the poor'.<sup>29</sup> Their sense of identity as scientists, rather than educationalists or social reformers, meant that they were committed to 'hold our hands and be patient' rather than intervene and 'fail to find and to see what we are looking for'.<sup>30</sup> Their 'moral bias' towards 'a very strict anarchy' meant that members (including the children) were empowered to 'initiate their own activities, their own order of things'.<sup>31</sup> Despite the Biologists' strong leadership, the minutes of the school meeting show that parents did have a voice on important points about the purposes and values of their children's schooling. For example, the fact that Williamson agreed to having a qualified teacher in the school at all suggests a compromise of his principle that 'we

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<sup>26</sup> E. Shorter, 'History of the Doctor-Patient Relationship', in N. Byam and R. Porter (eds), *Companion Encyclopedia of the History of Medicine*, vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 1993), 789.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret MacMillan (1911), cited in C. Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret MacMillan, 1860-1931* (Virago, 1990), 10 and 258.

<sup>28</sup> S. Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret MacMillan, 1860-1931*, 83.

<sup>30</sup> Pearse and Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment*, 125.

<sup>31</sup> I. H. Pearse and G. Scott Williamson, *Biologists in Search of Material* (1st pub London: Faber and Faber, April 1938; repub Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1982), 40-2.

have discovered that children up to the age of 16 or 17 prefer to teach themselves anything they want to learn'.<sup>32</sup>

The Centre school cannot be seen as 'fully under the control of its users'.<sup>33</sup> Instead it should be seen as under a control negotiated between children, their parents, their community and the Biologists. This negotiation was sometimes reflected in tensions, which have tended to be overlooked in official accounts, implying that the school provided exactly the kind of education that the parents wanted. These tensions are in themselves a sign that parents were able to enter into relationship and debate with Williamson.

It was the value placed on these relationship between the Biologists, staff, members and their children, which above all defined the vitality of this community. The evidence suggests that there were some tensions and imbalances in these relationships. However, it also suggests that they were relationships which allowed staff and members to change each other's minds and develop a 'different outlook on life'.<sup>34</sup> The value given to these relationships distinguishes it from the anonymous bureaucracy of the state system.

***The path not taken: 'an immense and magnificent failure'***<sup>35</sup>

Dominant accounts have blamed the Centre's closure on financial problems and the lack of governmental support. *The Lancet*, at the time, and Lewis, a social scientist, in the 1980s, offered more critical accounts of why the Centre failed and its ideas were not

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<sup>32</sup> Pearse and Williamson, *New Ideas*, talk read on 16 November 1948, Wellcome Archives SA/PHC/B.5/17,2)

<sup>33</sup> P.Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England: The People's Education* (London : Croom Helm, 1984), 100.

<sup>34</sup> Group interview with the Watsons, Wellcome Archives SA/PHC/H3/4.

<sup>35</sup> F. Donaldson, *Child of the Twenties* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959), 158.

more widely taken up. This section explores the validity of these criticisms and their wider implications for the viability of the 'path not taken'.

*The Lancet's* obituary of Williamson claims that it was his strong leadership which 'undermined the possibility of the development of a self-governing community with a life and vigour of its own apart from the inspiration and vigour of its founders'.<sup>36</sup> As discussed above in relation to the Centre school, research shows a more distributed view of power in which, despite it being the Biologist's 'baby',<sup>37</sup> members referred to 'our swimming pool', 'our dances' and on its closure, campaigned to the government for the continuation of 'our Centre'.<sup>38</sup>

*The Lancet* also offers critiques of the scientific ideas and methodologies of the founders, claiming that they had 'preconceived notions about the very matters they were investigating'.<sup>39</sup> According to *The Lancet*, their refusal to engage with mainstream scientific methods limited their impact. It is not within the remit of this essay to comment on the validity of their scientific approach or findings. However, I would argue that their rejection of the prevailing scientific concern with the pathological and psychological application of Darwinian ideas and their preference for environmental and anthropological explanations was a fertile starting point for ideas about community and education. The absence of rigorous clinical methods may also have helped it operate more successfully as a social and community centre, which people voluntarily wished to attend. Its success in these capacities is clear both from the numbers of families which attended (in 1943 the number of families was increasing to 850, an average daily use of

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<sup>36</sup> Obituary of Williamson, *The Lancet*, 13 June 1953, 1206.

<sup>37</sup> Henrietta Trotter, email sent Sunday 6 June 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Group interview with the Watsons, Wellcome Archives SA/PHC/H3/4; J. Comerford, *Health: The Unknown* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1947), 57.

<sup>39</sup> M. R. A. Chance, 'Where From Peckham', *The Lancet*, 15 April 1950, 727.

the Centre of more than 770 people, of whom, up to 200 were children who arrived after school)<sup>40</sup> and the testimonies of the people who attended. When I interviewed Dorothy Batten, who was a young child at the Centre, her emotional attachment was palpable and she stated without equivocation that she still misses the Centre.<sup>41</sup>

Lewis has claimed that the 'concept was utopian in terms of its belief that essentially large-scale social change could be accomplished by small communities, necessarily located in areas with stable populations and focusing solely on the private sphere of home and family.'<sup>42</sup> This critique needs to be understood within its context; a context in which utopian is a pejorative term and in which, as Suissa, a philosopher of education, has suggested, 'we have become incapable of conceptualizing any kind of social reality without the state'.<sup>43</sup> In the context of education in the twenty-first century, Halpin, philosopher of education, has suggested that 'utopian visions' are exactly what is needed.<sup>44</sup> The Centre was a space and a community in which, as Suissa has attributed more generally to anarchist education, 'we experiment with visions of a new political order'.<sup>45</sup> By its very existence, the Centre can contribute to challenging a grand narrative of 'twentieth-century universalism replacing the pathetic, unofficial, voluntary or philanthropic ventures of the nineteenth Century'.<sup>46</sup> Instead it offers a practical (rather than purely utopian) example of Margaret Mead's much quoted; 'never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.'

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<sup>40</sup> Pearse and Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment*, 190.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Dorothy Batten conducted by Emily Charkin on 22 April 2010.

<sup>42</sup> J. Lewis and B. Brookes, 'A Reassessment of the Work of the Peckham Health Centre, 1926-1951', *The Millbank Memorial Fund Quarterly, Health and Society*. 61/2 (1983), 307-50, at 345.

<sup>43</sup> J. Suissa, *Anarchism and Education: A Philosophical Perspective* (London: Routledge 2006), 5.

<sup>44</sup> D. Halpin, *Hope and Education: The Role of the Utopian Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2003), 2.

<sup>45</sup> Suissa, *Anarchism and Education: A Philosophical Perspective*, 150.

<sup>46</sup> C. Ward, 'The Path Not Taken', *The Raven, Anarchist Quarterly*. 1:3 (November 1987), 197.

The failure of the Centre does not invalidate the ideas which were practiced at the Centre and its school. It does, perhaps, raise questions about their viability in the economic and social contexts which prevailed. For example, an analysis of the Centre school shows how the Biologists compromised on some of their more radical ideas about education in order to meet the expectations of parents and the wider contexts of schooling. However, 'in speaking for hope'<sup>47</sup> the Centre posed questions, which are increasingly being raised about the viability (in environmental and human well-being terms) of those contexts rather than the ideas.

### ***The path not taken - yet***

In the UK pre-election televised leaders' debates, a teenager asked what they proposed to do about children being 'over-tested' and 'undereducated'. They all answered by describing changes to the organisation of schools and ways to achieve tougher discipline in the classroom. The victorious coalition government has since introduced a flagship programme of 'free schools'. This apparently radical term is, in practice, part of the same discourse about mechanisms of delivery and control. This kind of rhetoric and policy does not answer the teenager's important question which is about educational purposes and values, which are in their turn related to the choices we make about 'a form of life' and a 'view of human nature'.<sup>48</sup>

Berg, writer for children and about children, has described the Centre as a 'demonstration, a challenge and an irresistible inspiration'.<sup>49</sup> The attempt to use the

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<sup>47</sup> R. Williams, cited in Halpin, *Hope and Education*, 2.

<sup>48</sup> A. Macintyre, in R. Plant, *Community and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1974), 82.

<sup>49</sup> L. Berg 'Moving towards Self Government', in *Children's Right: Towards the Liberation of the Child* (London: Panther Books, 1972), 8-53 at 27.

Centre as a 'demonstration' can leave us 'bewitched'<sup>50</sup> by the times we live in. The Centre did not offer a solution to all the problems of society in the past, nor does it offer one in the present. An historical account offers instead a 'challenge' of current values and an 'inspiration' in the task of 'creat[ing] fresh values'.<sup>51</sup> The Centre challenges the prevailing 'pessimistic value systems', rooted in a dissatisfaction with ourselves, which represent children as victims in need of protection or 'demons' in need of control.<sup>52</sup> The Centre offers instead, a view that children, parents and communities (including working-class) are robust, responsible and capable of change. This is a path characterised by 'hope and optimism' instead of 'anxiety, even despair'.<sup>53</sup>

The Centre also offers a challenge to our 'forms of life' through its 'seemingly ordinary events and situations':<sup>54</sup> that up to 200 children were free to move around a building without rules, that a telephone could ring in a school classroom, that a school child could freely interact with a non-teaching adult, that an individual parent could be trusted with school funds to implement a curriculum idea, that a three-year-old could decide when she was ready to climb the bars in the gym and be allowed to 'practise carefully getting to the top, without interference',<sup>55</sup> that a parent could take her child out of school to go swimming; that adults and children could enjoy observing each other learn. These 'ordinary events' have become extraordinary in the context of a compulsory school system and culture in which such actions have become stigmatised, criminalised and

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<sup>50</sup> Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 6

<sup>51</sup> N. Blake, P. Smeyers, R. Smith and P. Standish, *Education in an Age of Nihilism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), xvii.

<sup>52</sup> H. Hendrick, 'Optimism and Hope Versus Anxiety and Narcissism: Some Thoughts on Children's Welfare Yesterday and Today', *History of Education*. 36/6 (November 2007), 747-68, at 768.

<sup>53</sup> Hendrick, 'Optimism and Hope Versus Anxiety and Narcissism: Some Thoughts on Children's Welfare Yesterday and Today', *History of Education*. 36/6 (November 2007), 747-68, at 750.

<sup>54</sup> I. H. Pearse and L. C. Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1943; 6th impression, 1947 used here), 206.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Henrietta Trotter conducted by Emily Charkin on 13 March 2010.

ultimately almost unimaginable. The Centre offers a path on which these 'events' could be again 'ordinary'.

This essay does not argue that we could or should adopt the same 'view of human nature' and the same 'form of life' as were practised in the Peckham Health Centre, 1935-50. This essay simply argues that it offers a story which should be heard not only by radicals and anarchists but by politicians, teachers, policy-makers and families; a story which reminds us of 'paths not taken' and 'fundamental moral choices';<sup>56</sup> a story which changes the terms of the debate; and a story that challenges us to choose again whether we could take the path of 'fraternal and autonomous associations from below' rather than 'governmental, bureaucratic, paternalistic and unloved institutions from above'.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> R. Plant, *Community and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1974), 72.

<sup>57</sup> C. Ward, 'The Path Not Taken', *The Raven, Anarchist Quarterly*. 1:3 ( November 1987), 198.