

To Michelle [REDACTED]  
Speakeasy Publications

Dear Michelle,

Here is my article, I hope still in time.  
Please feel to chip and chop and change- I was writer-educated  
in Reuters' subbing rooms and no one there is allowed to think they were  
Shakespeareans.

**UK "Public" Schools**  
by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims UK.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the French and the British Empires expanding rapidly as they took over more and more territory and imposed their yoke on more and more peoples, whether this was in the Maghreb, in India or Indochina. Both countries produced large administrative elites to rule their wide acres, and these good people had children.

The French solution to the problem of educating these children was to build French schools all over the colonies. The British solution was to send the children back to their native archipelago to spend their school days in boarding schools. Thus it was that more and more boarding schools sprang up all over the islands to deal with the children of the expatriate elite and middle classes. This much historical background is needed to explain why France today has few boarding schools and UK enough to take in 3.6% of the total teenage school population.

**The boarding school as a total institution**

Ervin Goffman, the father of ethno-methodology, has coined the term "total institution" to describe communities such as an army, a monastery, a prison or a hospital. The "total institution" is one that looks after its members in a 360 degree way, providing for their every need and structuring every moment of their waking day. The total society protects its members from the outside world and effectively shuts the outside world off from view.

In 1953, at the age of 13, I was dispatched to Ampleforth, a Benedictine school 20 miles from York, lost amid the highland moors. I spent 12 weeks there in the autumn term, 12 weeks in the winter term and 12 or more weeks in the Spring term.

For those 36 weeks of the year I was away from the normal world outside, in a kind of bubble. Everything you needed was provided for without venturing out into that other world, out there, over the horizon.

I needed a haircut - the school barber gave us short back and sides every four weeks-

I had mumps: I was isolated in the school infirmary, treated by the school doctor, and cared for by the school nurses.

I tore my trousers- the house matron took them and sewed them up.

Once inside a total institution like a boarding school, you lose sight of what is outside, beyond, over there; the total society gives you everything but regulates your every minute.

There was really no need for me to structure time myself- I had no time left to structure. Here was typical day time table:

6.30- up and wash . 15 minutes for this. Remember to fold your towel carefully or thirty lines ( amo, amare amavi , amatum) from the Head Dormitory Monitor.

6.45: You had to get past the House monitor at the foot of the steps by 6.45 or you'd get 40 lines ( j'aime, tu aimes, il aime , nous aimons, vous aimez, ils aiment).

We waited in line to be taken off to serve mass in one of the various chapels.

Other folk clean their teeth in the morning- Benedictines say mass ( we used to pronounce the a in "mass" long, so that it rhymed with " fast", that's because we were being trained to be " Catholic gentlemen".

From around 7.15 to 8.00 am on mass-serving mornings my time was unstructured. I used to feel almost lost.

8.00 Breakfast ..... We all sat at the four long tables in order of seniority. The Housemaster ( a priest), the Head of House and the House monitors all sat at the top table.

Then back to the dormitory to get beds made- sloppy bed-making got you more lines.

9.00 The whole school ( around 650 boys) assembled in the hall for the head master to speak to us. It was risky to fool about on the way to Hall as there were School Monitors all over the place. They were liberal with the number of lines they doled out. If you did not get your lines in within 24 hours, you had them doubled. If these were late, a caning could be in the offing.

At risk of boring you, dear reader, I could take you through the whole day timetable. There was no unstructured time in an Ampleforth first year's day, except an hour between the grace at the end of supper and House prayers at 9.00pm and maybe 20 minutes you had in bed when you could read but not talk, leading up to LIGHTS OUT at 10.00 pm. Amazingly, the system did not prescribe the times you went to the toilet.

What I have been describing ( and I almost feel I am back in those passageways and classrooms) has of course changed in many details. Ampleforth today is a mixed school and this is major change in ethos. The students today are less encased in total time structuring ( we wrote letters to our parents from 9.15 to 10.00 every Sunday morning, before high Mass, with a Study Monitor presiding over us and stopping reprehensible behaviour like conversation ). They have more small freedoms today.

But Ampleforth today remains a " total institution" , with much the same structure as

a hospital or a prison, an institution in which the obedience to the structure is central.

How well does such a system prepare people for responsible life in a liberal democracy? In my own case pretty badly. I went to Oxford with an open scholarship but was quite unable to cope with the literally amazing freedom that university life offered. I went beserk, as many boarding school entrants do, ended up with a 4<sup>th</sup> class honours degree ( usually reserved for Indian Princelings initially admitted for their prowess at cricket) It was like going from prison to a sort of Las Vegas-like wonder world. My story is far from unique.

### **Learning the UK class system**

The attraction to some people of travelling first class on a train is that other people are excluded. At Ampleforth it was drummed into our heads that most people could not come here, that we were a privileged elite. This was right and proper but we had to respond by knowing our station, knowing that we were to become tomorrow's leaders, that we had to be "catholic gentlemen", that "noblesse oblige". All of this we were taught in pep-talks, in lectures and from the underlying attitudes of many of our teachers.

What we were not taught, but what we picked up was that *within* the school there were major class distinctions. Gradually you got to know that the boys in Cuthberts and Edwards tended to be from landed families and were a clear cut above the sons of rising merchants in the house I was in, Oswalds. Another house was mainly made up of the sons of Army people. (*the word "people" here has a clear classist ring, in UK English*)

A total institution is, by its nature, hierarchical. We were implicitly and explicitly trained to think hierarchically. Though class belonging was a fundamental hierarchy, brains also counted. If you were bright then you were destined for Oxbridge, if you were less bright then Cranwell (RAF) and if you were as thick as two planks then you'd probably try to get into Sandhurst (Army Officer Training School). Here again, we boys came to think in pecking orders.

I sometimes wish I had been brought up in Tibetan monastery, also a "total institution", but so much more open minded, maybe?

### **The Boarding School as a replacement for your Family**

To my mind the UK elite is amazing; these people sincerely believe they are doing the best for their children by exiling them from the family. A common pattern in some families is to send their child to state primary school till they are seven or eight and then send them off to boarding Prep School. From there they move up to a public school from which they emerge at the age of eighteen.

Are there any other parents in the world who willingly say goodbye to their kids at age seven? Are there any other parents in the world who give up their influence over their own flesh and blood so young? Are there any other parents who place the values of the total institution above those of the two families that have come together in the persons of the father and the mother. If the time spent being pregnant was negotiable, then maybe some of these rich English mums would have it reduced to