organization without authority

Dilemmas of Social Control in Free Schools

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PREFACE

THIS IS A STUDY of alternative organizations—the free schools, communes, and collectives that grew out of the radical cultural and political movements of the 1960s. The drama of that decade, reverberating into the 1970s and beyond, was significant for American culture and American organizational life. Yet we are still puzzled by the changes the sixties brought. This book speaks to that puzzlement, offering a systematic analysis of the characteristic organizations produced by the sixties—organizations that rejected hierarchy and authority in the attempt to devise more liberating forms of human cooperation. Study of these organizations can reveal new facets of the period in which we live and allow glimpses of the forces that may change our world in the future.

Sociologists regularly study organizations, believing that a society's capacities for organization determine the limits of its achievements. Thus there are many careful, empirically rich, and theoretically sophisticated studies of bureaucracies and other more or less formal institutions, from political parties to professional associations to protest movements. We can now understand how formal organizations work, the characteristic pathologies to which they are subject, and the ways in which they structure opportunities for action. Alternative organizations, in contrast—despite their apparently radical challenge to traditional organization—have received little more than polemical attention. Analysts have had difficulty taking them seriously as social forms with their own structure and inner dynamics.

I adopt neither an advocate's nor an adversary's position toward alternative organizations. On the one hand, I do not think they provide a miraculous solution to the difficulties of arranging human communities. In this, obviously, I differ from their most committed proponents and participants. But on the other hand, unlike some critics, I do not regard organizations

without authority as mere mistakes or diversions from the serious business of life. Instead, I analyze their inner workings and historical context. This means a focus on patterns of conflict and means of social control, as well as on the enthusiasm, engagement, and participation that these organizations can sometimes generate.

The study begins with two free schools, "Group High" and "Ethnic High," examining how they actually worked—how their members influenced and inspired, cooperated with and controlled one another. Through accounts of other alternative organizations, such as free clinics, communes, and collectives, the analysis extends beyond free schools, developing a general model of the dynamics of organizations that have abandoned authority.

Every book rests on certain animating ideas which it embodies but cannot prove. Behind this book lies an image of the interdependence of organization and culture. Watching teachers and students in free schools, I became convinced that culture, in the sense of symbols, ideologies, and a legitimate language for discussing individual and group obligations, provides the crucial substrate on which new organizational forms can be erected. The ability to make altered patterns of social control effective depends on the development of new cultural resources. Even the most personal, charismatic forms of influence depend ultimately on shared ideology. Organizational innovation and cultural change are continually intertwined, since it is culture that creates the new images of human nature and new symbols with which people can move one another. Organizations, in turn, are the contexts within which cultural meanings are used, tested, and made real. Thus an analysis of the inner dynamics of free schools can lead to an understanding of the cultural as well as organizational patterns that shape the age in which we live.

I have acquired many debts in the course of work on this book. Most important is that owed the students and teachers of Group High and Ethnic High. Although the schools must here bear uninspiring pseudonyms, they were in fact exciting places. The teachers and students welcomed me and shared their lives with me, giving much more than can appear in these pages. As a sociologist, I focus on the dilemmas of managing collective life, thereby slighting some of the most intimate, funniest, and perhaps also most prosaic moments at the two schools. Inevitably descriptions of so rich and varied a reality fail to capture its full vitality. My interest in organizations without authority created particular difficulties for the portrayal of Ethnic High. Whereas both schools were dedicated to the counterculture's quest for community, Ethnic High had a second agenda—the attempt to create an interracial community where values of ethnic pride and political awareness could flourish. In focusing on nonhierarchical, egalitarian organization, I have inevitably slighted the other side of Ethnic High's accomplishments.

This book began as a dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley. The original inspiration for the research came from Carole Joffe, an accomplished field worker, who first convinced me to try studying a free school. For this, and for her continuing help and friendship, I am grateful. For support, both emotional and intellectual, as well as excellent critical advice, I would like to thank my adviser, Arlie Hochschild. Reinhard Bendix and Robert Bellah also deserve much thanks. Each had a profound influence on my basic intellectual commitments, influence that I hope is reflected in this book. I owe a special debt to Neil Smelser, who commented extensively on two drafts of the manuscript. His analytic clarity, which is legendary, is matched by his warmth and human concern.

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Introduction

FREE SCHOOLS AS MODELS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

THIS BOOK EXPLORES the organizational consequences of the attempt to abolish authority. Based on a study of two alternative high schools, it examines the ways organizations without formal authority coordinate and control social life.

Normally we take authority for granted. It seems necessary and inevitable that some people should claim the right to govern others. In modern organizations we have come to expect a formal hierarchy of superiors and subordinates with specified rights and duties. Yet in the contemporary period, we have seen new challenges to authority. Countercultural movements of the 1960s and the 1970s have attacked hierarchy and bureaucracy, while alternative organizations, such as communes and collectives, free schools, and free clinics, have experimented with more egalitarian, participatory organizational forms.

When we look closely at the dynamics of social control in nonhierarchical, antibureaucratic organizations, we find that they *do* invent ways to regulate social life. In free schools, communes, and other such organizations, personal charisma provides one alternative to authority. People cooperate and participate out of attraction or devotion to dynamic, engaging personalities. Organizations that reject authority also liberate other sources of energy and enthusiasm. The gratifications of collective life, a sense of enhanced identification with the goals of the organization, and the pleasures of equality itself can provide sources of organizational strength.

There are also heavy costs to the decision to renounce authority. Charismatic influence is fragile and unpredictable. Group sentiments are subject to swings from euphoria to depression, which alternately overload and then paralyze collective organization. The enhanced motivation produced by

equality is counterbalanced by the loss of legitimate influence based on special ability or expertise.

By examining in depth life within two free schools, I shall try to untangle the dynamics of nonhierarchical, antibureaucratic organizations. My goal will be not simply to weigh the costs and benefits of abandoning authority but also to explore the consequences of various strategies for regulating social life in the absence of authority. I shall try to analyze organizations without authority as Max Weber did bureaucratic authority—by outlining the kinds of dynamic processes that result from a particular structure of control. How organizations without authority provide for social control is not at bottom a question about how organizations can succeed; it is rather a question about how patterns of interaction are altered when authority is outlawed.

The free schools that emerged during the late 1960s were only the most visible of a whole collection of alternative organizations inspired by the experiences of young people in the civil-rights movement, the New Left, and the counterculture. These new institutions differed greatly in goals and structure. Some, such as free clinics and legal collectives, tried to demystify professional authority and provide services to previously neglected client groups; others, such as communes, aimed largely to provide a more satisfying life for their own members. What united these diverse organizations was their rejection of authority as a valid principle for regulating group life.

Free schools grew out of this same disillusionment with authority. The idea that children can learn best in an atmosphere of freedom has roots going as far back as Tolstoy and Rousseau, who developed educational theories based on a faith in human nature and the salutory effects of freedom (Lawrence, 1970). Similar ideals inspired the progressive educational reforms of the 1920s (Cremin, 1961). But in the 1960s—with innovative educators animated by the general revulsion against authority—the case for educational reform was put with new emotional force. Summerhill (Neill, 1960) was rediscovered, and Herbert Kohl (1967), John Holt (1964), Jonathan Kozol (1967), and others described in heart-rending terms the destructive effects of conventional schooling on children. To this picture of wasteful cruelty they counterposed images of children blossoming, reaching out for new experiences, and delighting in learning in an atmosphere of kindness and respect, freed from authority, regulation, and humiliation. Inspired by these ideas, groups of parents, teachers, and students began in the mid-1960s to found many small alternative schools (the terms *free school* and *alternative school* will be used interchangeably), usually outside, and in self-conscious opposition to, the system of public schooling (Graubard, 1972).

Free schools create a radically different atmosphere than do traditional schools. Adults allow children to explore their environment, to discover what they themselves want to learn, to play, make noise, move around, or

even do nothing. But what is really distinctive about these schools is not so much their pedagogy or educational philosophy as their purpose: they are designed as models of a new kind of society. They abolish authority relations between teachers and students—not simply to educate children better but to create a new sort of human being and a new model of cooperative social life (Duke, 1976). It is this utopian determination to change the entire structure of human relations by changing the structure of schooling that makes free schools so sociologically interesting. By understanding how these organizations without authority work—or fail to work—we gain new insight into organizational dynamics and into the special character of modern organizational life.

Two major questions are treated in this book. One is an analytic question about how organizations without authority work. The second question is historical, asking why such organizations emerged in the contemporary period. In laying out the logic behind each of these questions, I shall try to show how the larger theoretical argument about organizations takes shape in relation to both the peculiarities of free schools as organizations and the distinctive characteristics of the two schools studied. Although free schools are interesting in large part for what they tell about the general features of organizations without authority, the fact that free schools are schools—that like other schools they possess weak incentives and sanctions, poor measures of their own performance, and most important, a built-in distinction between the roles of teachers and students—has important implications for the succeeding analysis.

The Analytic Question

My primary analytic focus is on a "functionalist" question: how do organizations that reject authority find other ways to regulate social life? The book offers a set of answers to this question. However, I will be more concerned with conflict and organizational dynamics than with stability or organizational survival. This emphasis in part represents a theoretical choice: what is important about authority—and thus about alternatives to authority—is the way it structures social conflict. But the issue of social conflict (and thus of social control) is also thrust upon us by the reality of life in free schools, which, however gentle, is permeated by the competing interests of teachers and students.

Fundamental to the philosophy of alternative schools is a commitment to abolish authority in the relations between teachers and students. Despite this self-conscious rejection of authority, free schools, like traditional schools, have built-in inequalities: that between adults and children, and, overlapping this, the differentiation between teachers and students. In high schools, of course, students are old enough to make a claim for equality with adults, and in alternative high schools they are expected to do so. For in free schools, any inequalities between teachers and students are consid-

ered a problem to be overcome.[1] Yet even in free schools the students and teachers differ in interests, status, and responsibilities.

Charles Bidwell (1965:973) has pointed out that schools are client-serving organizations charged with "the moral and technical socialization of the young." This in itself creates a conflict of interests between students and teachers. Willard Waller (1932:196) puts it simply: "Pupils are the material in which teachers are supposed to produce results." Although free school teachers do not see themselves as "the enem[ies] of the spontaneous life of groups of children," they still want to shape students and so they must find a way to influence and at times to control them. Even the abolition of authority is an important instrument for producing in students the kinds of changes teachers want.

Students and teachers also differ in their level of commitment to their respective roles. Teachers' roles are "achievement roles"—jobs for which teachers are paid—while student roles are "recruitment roles" in which students are involuntary and often unwilling participants (Bidwell, 1965). Although this asymmetry is reduced in free schools where teachers are often paid very little and students frequently come to the school by choice, teachers and students do not have the same outlook on their participation in the schools. Teachers have responsibility, even while they lack authority, and students are ultimately clients, even when they claim equality.

Free schools are not, then, organizations without problems of social control and coordination. In free schools social control is in the interest of teachers who, although they have agreed to do without authority, still want to maintain the schools where they teach and to influence, stimulate, and involve students. When teachers try to engage students' attention with tales of their own romantic exploits, or teachers worry about their status in the student peer culture in an effort to maintain their influence, they are attempting to solve the problems of teachers who retain their responsibility for and their commitment to schooling even while they insist that students be free of adult authority.

The conflicts of interest between teachers and students provide a framework for analyzing organizations without authority. No organization escapes the need for social control and regulation, but in the case of free schools it is possible to identify clearly the actors for whom social control will be a pressing issue. Although it may seem perverse to study responses to the absence of authority in organizations that maintain a residual distinction between "superiors" and "subordinates," the relations between teachers and students in free schools actually provide a general model for

1. It would, of course, be possible to have education that did not involve a differentiation between teachers and students. Ivan Illich (1970) has argued for a conception of education that does away with schools and schooling altogether. The free school movement, however, has emphasized putting teachers and students in a new relationship to one another rather than abolishing these statuses.

understanding problems of social control in organizations without authority.[2] One can avoid the functionalist fallacy of assuming that organizations "need" and will therefore invent some replacement for authority in order to survive, and instead identify the particular actors who search out means to control or influence others. The differential responsibility of teachers for sustaining the school also gives free schools an advantage over some other alternative organizations. Schools may be more likely to find alternatives to authority, to develop effective means of social control, than would organizations without any differentiations of status, commitment, or responsibility.

The major difficulty in studying social control in free schools is that of defining organizational success. If one wishes to understand how schools, or teachers, find functional substitutes for authority, it would be useful to know whether they have succeeded. Schools pose the issue of authority and control in a particularly intense way (Waller, 1932; Metz, 1978a), but they are unlike many other authoritatively coordinated organizations in that they have no clearly defined measures of success and no standard set of techniques known to produce desired outcomes. Although teachers want to have a significant impact on students—to shape them morally as well as intellectually—they have great difficulty assessing their own work performance (Lortie, 1975).

Definitions of organizational success are even more uncertain in free schools, where reassuring routines of classroom life are absent and conventional standards of academic achievement are no longer regarded as valid. Teachers in the two schools I studied valued student autonomy and school solidarity; they took pride in such nontraditional achievements as a student's gaining the confidence to stand up to his parents or a group of students' joining in a collective foot-massaging exercise. But it was hard for either teachers or an outside observer to evaluate school success. This in turn complicates the task of evaluating whether the alternative means of social control these schools developed were actually effective.

A collectively run factory or a medical clinic that tried to abolish authority would have to invent much more effective substitutes for authority than

2. Contemporary challenges to authority often change the relations between superiors and subordinates rather than abolish these roles. Although a commune or an alternative newspaper collective (Rothschild-Whitt, 1976) may be established as a community of equals, the founders or those most committed to the organization and other participants are usually differentiated from one another. Some alternative organizations, like legal collectives and free clinics, still maintain distinctions—as between lawyers and clients or doctors and patients—even while changing their significance. The symbolic value of equality may be reduced if one cannot be equal to one's "superiors." And because participants in alternative organizations are interested in symbolic challenges to traditional patterns, they often seek to equalize precisely those relations that are traditionally most hierarchical (for instance, doctor-patient, lawyer-client, teacher-student).

free schools have to. The free schools I studied tried to teach students—sometimes in very creative, innovative ways. Their requirements for organizational survival, however, were minimal. They had to keep at least some students coming to school, and at least a few attending classes, but they could tolerate weaker forms of social control and coordination than could more clearly task-oriented organizations.

Consequently, this book is not, nor could it rightfully claim to be, a study of organizational success. I studied only two schools, for a year each; and each school changed from year to year, sometimes from week to week, in the cohesiveness, enthusiasm, and apparent effectiveness of its programs. One would have to observe many schools, over a longer period than my study permitted, and have some measure of organizational effectiveness, to draw any firm conclusion about which responses to the absence of authority are necessary for school survival or for the attainment of particular educational goals.

Educational goals are in fact one of the thorniest problems for the study of alternative schools. The degree to which the two schools studied had clear goals—about teaching and learning or about what the school should be—in part determined how hard they *tried*, or how able they were, to find effective substitutes for authority. Since goals appeared to be a resource for motivating teachers and students, they cannot be separated from the means of social control necessary to attain them. Organizational techniques that clarify and emphasize goals are one of the important mechanisms free schools use as alternatives to authority.

Schools are, in sum, peculiar places to study organization without authority because they retain unequal statuses even when they claim to reject authority and because they are "weak" organizations with poor measures of their own performance. But schools also provide unique opportunities for the study of authority. Even in traditional schools problems of authority are much in evidence, in part because authority is so fragile. Close studies of classrooms—those of Philip Jackson (1968), Louis Smith and William Geoffrey (1968), Ray Rist (1973), Mary Metz (1978b), and Frederic Wiseman (in his film *High School*)—reveal much explicit discussion of authority, obedience, students' rights and obligations, and the conditions of classroom order. This discussion often has a moral (or moralistic) tone. Both students and teachers talk about what is fair, right, expected, tolerable, or punishable. Cultural understandings about authority are exposed because they cannot be taken for granted. Although the official task of the school is to transmit knowledge and skills, both critics and friends of schooling have pointed out that moral and cultural socialization remains its dominant function (Mead, 1951; Eisenstadt, 1956; Dreeben, 1968; Collins, 1971; Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Schools are prime centers for transmission of our culture's ideology of authority.

An attack on authority in schools can therefore be seen as an attempt to rework the patterns of authority in our culture, precisely at the point where they are most in evidence and most richly elaborated. Free schools have been a primary locus for experimentation with new organizational forms, and examination of their dynamics can tell a great deal about changes in modern organizational life. Indeed, the absence of practical constraints on free schools makes them good incubators for the new cultural and institutional forms emerging in modern society.

In summary, this book explores the organizational dynamics of schools that have rejected authority. Alternative organizations do not escape the problems of power and social control that drive other organizations, but their members operate within different rules of the game. I have used free schools to explore the kinds of dilemmas, conflicts, and potentialities that emerge in such organizations. I have also examined similar processes in other antiauthoritarian organizations, such as communes, free medical clinics, and religious movements, to see in what ways a model of organizations without authority can be generalized beyond free schools.

The Historical Question

The second major concern of this book is to locate free schools and other alternative organizations in an historical framework. The analytic question is of interest precisely because contemporary organizations are experimenting with new patterns of authority. It is therefore important to explore the social roots of these experiments. In part this is a matter of understanding the emergence of the counterculture, which incubated the ideology underlying free schools and other alternative organizations. But it is also a matter of trying to analyze the economic and social forces that converged in the creation of these experiments. It is inherently risky to try to link particular social movements to larger changes in culture, the economy, or class structure. Such analyses are necessarily speculative, and they crumble like a house of cards when history again twitches beneath them. But even if answers are necessarily tentative, an attempt must nevertheless be made to understand the sociological significance of recent attempts to create organizations without authority.

I have employed two strategies for understanding the historical significance of free schools. First, I ask what free schools teach—what their participants are trying to accomplish. Using an inductive approach, I try to link what free schools actually teach to the larger social changes that brought them into being. My second strategy is to examine the social groups these schools serve. I look at the differing impact of alternative schools on students from different class backgrounds and draw together information on the social and political groups that allied to create alternative schools. My reasoning is that if one can understand the ways in which various groups

saw free schools as an answer to their own difficulties, one may understand better why free schools emerged in the contemporary period and what their future is likely to be.

Neither of these approaches to the historical question can provide comprehensive answers. Both approaches reason outward—from the detailed life of two schools and the vicissitudes of their political histories, to the larger free school movement, to the broader social changes of which they were a part, and finally to the intersection of social and economic changes in the contemporary period. Although it is not possible to unravel the sources of contemporary social changes on the basis of two case studies, a careful analysis of the actual workings of countercultural institutions may be a better basis for serious analysis of their historical importance than the usual notion that they represent a "rebellion" of the young against the old, of human nature against modern technology, or of good people against a bad society.[3]

The Two Schools

Group High and Ethnic High[4] were both alternative public high schools in Berkeley, California. The two schools differed in many respects—size, ideology, academic orientation, and, most important, the educational, class, and racial backgrounds of their students. Because the schools differed in so many ways, one cannot weigh the relative importance of any single factor—say, size or student ideology—in shaping responses to the absence of authority. However, contrasts between the schools can add a new theoretical dimension to the analytic and historical arguments.

Group High lived out the free school ideal. Life was chaotic, but lively and engrossing. Students brought homemade granola and organic dried

3. Few serious histories have attempted to understand the roots of the counterculture. Richard Flacks (1971) has traced the humanistic ideology of student rebels to earlier bohemian traditions; Daniel Bell (1976) has traced the hedonism of the youth culture to the modernist movement in high culture and to the consumerism promoted by modern capitalism; and Theodore Roszak (1969) has interpreted the history of the counterculture as a rebellion against modern technological society, a view shared in part by Philip Slater (1970). Although the ideas of the counterculture, such as they are, can certainly be traced back to earlier critiques of industrial society (all the themes of the counterculture can be found in the tradition of cultural criticism described by Raymond Williams [1958]), most analyses of contemporary cultural and political movements suffer from a failure to look seriously at the movement they wish to explain. Free schools are hardly "hedonistic," and despite their own ideology they are much less a protest against modern society than an adaptation to it. Flacks, who actually studied student protesters, comes closer than the others to a responsible sociological account of the roots of the student movement, but his analysis is also clouded by a kind of romanticism.

4. The names of the two schools and of all teachers and students have been changed to protect the identity of participants. Occasional biographical details have also been altered to preserve confidentiality.

fruits to communal breakfasts; they talked continuously about dreams, ecology, population control, and the importance of finding one's own identity. Teachers were treated like pals; everyone dressed in blue jeans, or women occasionally in long, peasant-style skirts; the atmosphere was one of self-conscious egalitarianism. Group High was a large school with more than two hundred students, the great majority of whom were white, middle or upper-middle class, and from well-educated liberal families. Although these students shared a countercultural alienation from the larger society, many were enthusiastic, involved members of the alternative school community. On its good days Group High resembled a scout camp or a Quaker meeting—with sincere, conscientious, active young people eagerly trying to do what was "right" for themselves and the school. Group High's students were ideologically determined to resist any sign of teacher authority, but these were the same academically skilled, intellectually motivated, middle-class youth who make good, cooperative (if occasionally arrogant) students in traditional schools. Students believed in the school and its values even if those values sanctioned rebellion. Although Group High's teachers lacked authority and had to combat occasional student apathy, defiance, or self-indulgence, they faced an easier challenge than did teachers at Ethnic High. Because Group High's students saw themselves as part of a new social movement, they were strongly motivated to prove—to themselves and to their teachers—that they were the committed, self-directed, creative community participants the counterculture so much admired.

Ethnic High was smaller than Group High and its student body, of about a hundred, was more ethnically and racially diverse. Ethnic High's students were predominantly from poor working-class families (although there was a small group of upper-middle-class students similar to those at Group High) and the school had a unique commitment to a "multicultural" identity. A third of the staff and student body were black, approximately a third Chicano, a small number Asian, and the remainder white. Although a few students had solid academic backgrounds, the large majority had poor academic skills, compounded by histories of school rebellion and failure.

The atmosphere at Ethnic High was friendly and relaxed, but it had a different tone from that at Group High. Students dressed more stylishly and carried themselves more as adults. Although the school was often filled with lively conversation, it was likely to be informal conversation—chatting or joking or "fooling around"—rather than the self-conscious "participation" of students at Group High. Yet Ethnic High was a free school in the sense that its teachers had abandoned authority, seeing it as a barrier to effective education. Students were free to come and go as they pleased, to lounge around, read magazines, or wander in and out of classrooms whether or not a class was theoretically in session. And teachers aspired to make students full participants in the school community. But Ethnic High's students often seemed bored and indifferent rather than stimulated by the informality of

the free school. They liked their egalitarian teachers, but they found little in the free school atmosphere itself to inspire their confidence or their active engagement with school life. Ethnic High had the loose structure and the relaxed, egalitarian relations between teachers and students that mark a free school, but it was a free school without a free school ideology.

Students were drawn to Ethnic High largely because of its political and social values rather than its alternative educational style. They appreciated its freer, more egalitarian atmosphere, but its major attraction was its ethnically heterogeneous staff and its emphasis on the political aspects of ethnic and racial identity. For the students, lack of authority was a negative virtue—an absence of pressure and humiliation—rather than the fulfillment of a positive ideology.

The students themselves had ambivalent attitudes toward authority. They liked having a school where they could say what they thought without "the teacher look[ing] at you like you [are] crazy." And they took pride in the political and social radicalism they shared with their teachers. However, in other ways many students had quite old-fashioned values about authority: they sometimes perceived their easygoing teachers as failing to do their jobs. Holding a somewhat traditional view of authority, in which teachers had the responsibility to make students learn, Ethnic High's students found more reason to resist than to cooperate with their teachers. The loyalty inspired by the school's multicultural ideology was not complemented by an ideology legitimating egalitarian teacher-student relationships for their own sake. A combination of ethnic pride and structured academic demands might have inspired Ethnic High's students; but in a free school atmosphere, where teachers thought that structured demands might damage or further alienate students, students and teachers often worked at cross-purposes.

Precisely because the students were so different—those at Group High relatively conforming and cooperative even while they believed in rebellion against authority, and those at Ethnic High rebellious and uncooperative even while they believed in the traditional authority of teachers—a comparison of the two schools allows unique insights into the dynamics of organizations without authority. Both schools lacked authority, but at Group High the absence of authority was accompanied by a self-conscious commitment to building alternative organizational forms. At Ethnic High the absence of authority resulted as much from an inability to exert control as from conscious planning; the teachers' loss of authority was not complemented by student commitment to the principles of alternative education.

To the degree that two such different schools can be seen to develop similar organizational patterns, there is reason to think that these are general functional alternatives to authority. To a striking degree similarities do exist between the responses of teachers and students at Group High and Ethnic High, despite sharp contrasts between the schools in style and educational focus. Influence based on personal attraction, conflicting pressures for

group solidarity and personal freedom, and a renegotiation of status inequalities between teachers and students appear in both schools in response to the absence of authority. Comparing the two schools, however, allows one to judge the degree to which these alternatives to authority are dependent for their effectiveness on preexisting ideological and cultural commitments.

A second advantage of the contrast between Group High and Ethnic High is that it allows for separate answers to the analytic and historical questions. An examination of some of the substitutes for authority that emerge only at Group High reveals the unique contribution of contemporary ideology to solving the problems of social control without authority. Finally, contrasts between Ethnic High and Group High allow one to see the consequences of free school structure for students of different types. During the period when I observed the two schools, Group High seemed to work better than Ethnic High, although no clear lesson can be drawn from two case histories. In another year, given differing levels of initial enthusiasm or with more or less exciting teachers, each school might have fared very differently. However, the free school movement of the 1960s and 1970s has had a different meaning for middle-class than for working-class students. In addition, the values and life experiences of the two groups created contrasting attitudes toward cooperation and authority. Such cultural and class differences, although not a central focus of this book, are of great interest for policymakers attempting to design educational institutions that can serve a heterogeneous population.

METHODS → Group High and Ethnic High had each been in existence for a year and a half at the time of my research. I studied the schools during the early 1970s, spending a full academic year in each. Understanding the structure of social life at the two schools required much more than observing classes, although classes told a great deal about cooperation and social control. But what went on in classes made little sense apart from the rich flow of informal interaction outside the classroom. Often the most important relations in the school were created (and revealed) in casual discussions between teachers and students, at the many long, sometimes passionate, school meetings, and in the myriad informal social events such as parties, lunches, dinners, picnics, and field trips. Talking at length with students and teachers about the school, their participation in it, and their relations with one another was also an important part of my field work.

The informality of the schools was in some ways an advantage. I was accepted easily among the throng of adults—teachers, assistants, volunteers—who collected around these experimental schools. The egalitarian ethos predisposed students to welcome any people who were "willing to share something of themselves." Since classes were seldom more than informal discussions, it was easy to talk freely with both teachers and students. The one disadvantage for an observer was that many different activities were

always going on at once in any given place, and nothing happened according to schedule, so that it was hard to be sure one had seen all the most important events in the life of the school. I tried to mix observational strategies —sometimes spending a whole day with an individual student going from place to place, sometimes spending the day with a teacher to see how he or she handled a variety of classes and informal negotiations with students. I tried to attend all group meetings and to go along for all outings, retreats, parties, and other out-of-school events. In each school I also selected one class to observe regularly in order to understand what the cumulative experience of the class members was over time. This many-stranded, unstructured approach to the schools was, I think, the best way of capturing the variety of experiences that held teachers and students together and of participating in a large proportion of what were the most salient, intense experiences for both students and teachers. However, my study also suffers from the disadvantages of unsystematic methods. It provides a good picture of each school as a living entity, but it does not, for example, give equal weight to the experiences of all the members of the schools. Students who participated fully and formed an important part of the atmosphere of each school contribute more to my picture of the two schools than students who were less involved.

THE ORGANIZATION of the book follows the set of questions outlined above. Part one provides the theoretical and historical background of the study. Chapter 1 shows to what degree and in what sense Group High and Ethnic High were organizations without authority, while chapter 2 describes the background of the two schools, examining how the unique features of Berkeley as a community influenced the schools and how the political and administrative arrangements under which Group High and Ethnic High operated constrained or freed them for educational innovation.

Part two, chapters 3, 4, and 5, outlines the three major responses of Group High and Ethnic High to the absence of authority: personal influence, collective controls, and status equalization. Each of these chapters analyzes the advantages and the limitations of one of these basic alternatives to authority. These solutions to the difficult problems of social control in the absence of authority create their own additional tensions, and these tensions produce a characteristic kind of organizational dynamics in alternative organizations. Each of these alternatives to authority also depends on the others, and on the transformation of underlying cultural and ideological patterns. Part three examines these broader changes. It weaves together organizational analysis with historical argument, evaluating the short-term consequences and the long-term significance of free schools and other alternative organizations.

PART ONE

renouncing authority

1

THE STRUCTURE OF FREEDOM

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to say that Group High and Ethnic High were organizations "without authority"? First, it clearly does *not* mean that they existed in a world without authority. These free schools operated within a larger social and legal order in which authority was taken for granted. Their teachers were employed by and legally accountable to a public school system, and both students and teachers were subject to the same law, police power, and political authority that form a background to life in all institutions in our society. Thus we may be sure that had Group High or Ethnic High developed into full-fledged anarchic communities, seriously challenging public order or trying to take children away from their families, they would have been quickly brought into line by established social authorities. But despite these external constraints, Group High and Ethnic High had begun to build group life on new principles.

Internally these schools had abolished authority, though some traces, discussed below, still remained. Critical for our purposes is the fact that Group High and Ethnic High had gone so far in dismantling authority that they were forced to seek new forms of social control. And they were caught up in a new kind of organizational dynamics—derived not from authority, but from its absence.

What, then, is the "absence" or "loss" of authority? How, indeed, can we imagine social organization without authority, except as uncontrolled anarchy on the one hand, or sheer coercion on the other? The classic definition of authority is that of Max Weber (1925:152): "authority [*Herrschaft*—"imperative control" or "rulership"] is the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons." But why did Weber focus so exclusively on command? After all, he himself recognized that all sorts of decisions and rules may also embody authority. But

by focusing on commands—indeed, a "command with a given specific content"—and the duty of a specific group to obey, he emphasized that authority is a *specialized kind* of control over others: it is a set of institutionalized roles or rules in the name of which commands can be issued, from which commands will be obeyed. It is the institutionalization of power into positions or persons with the right to rule that for Weber constitutes authority. Thus if teachers have rights (or claim rights) *as teachers* to tell students what to do, they have (or claim) authority. If they do not have such rights as teachers, then whether or not a given teacher may, for example, be able to persuade a student to do something because the student will enjoy it, or bribe a student by giving him a ride to the movies, or charm a student by sheer force of personality, the teacher lacks authority.

I do not claim that the free schools under discussion had no need of social control. Precisely the opposite was true. But I do claim that they lacked authority. They had undermined, both symbolically and practically, that set of specialized expectations, roles, and rules that define and sustain authority. In attacking authority, free schools also attack both hierarchy and bureaucracy. But neither of these is essential to authority. In a fully representative democracy, for example, authority can be vested in a set of rules for making binding decisions, without the presence, at least in theory, of any element of hierarchy. Similarly, as Weber made clear, two of the classic types of authority—"charismatic" authority and "traditional" authority—both involve a leader's claim to the *right* to command because he is who he is, without recourse to bureaucratic rule. Authority rests in the (effective) claim of a specialized status or role (or a divine destiny) which carries with it the right of command and the expectation of obedience.

What characterized Group High and Ethnic High was the collapse of a differentiated sphere of command. What distinguished relations between teachers and students at Group High and Ethnic High from traditional authority relationships were the many situations in which no commands were given and none were thought necessary. These conditions involved a striking change in organizational dynamics—a change in symbolism and atmosphere, as well as a shift in the bargaining power of teachers and students.

The Dynamics of Defiance

Traditional authority has distinctive dynamics: once it is challenged successfully, once a command is given but not obeyed, the whole edifice of authority begins to crumble. Because authority does not consist simply of a power relationship but also of a set of roles and rules in which the right to command resides, an authority holder must do more than get his way in this or that instance; he must also protect the *right* to command. This right depends on an institutionalized status or office and ultimately on the presumption that commands can be backed up with sanctions. Thus when an authority holder fails to enforce his power to command, both his power and the institutionalized role in which his right of command rests may quickly unravel.

Willard Waller (1932:165-167) provides an excellent example of the dynamics of traditional teacher authority when he reports the story told to him by a young, inexperienced teacher who lost control of his class. It is a chilling case of the fulfillment of a teacher's worst nightmare—the ultimate outcome of a failure of traditional authority.

> The second day I began to realize what was happening. The disorder started the next day about where it had left off the day before. I discovered that I could best keep the whole room in view by stationing myself over in the front corner, to the left of the room, but the trouble with that was that it left the other side too little supervised, and there were some troublesome boys over there. I allowed myself to be drawn from one side of the room to the other. When I was on one side of the room, things would quiet down there, and I would be much encouraged and would entertain the hope momentarily that I was getting the situation in hand. But then noise and disorder would arise on the other side of the room. I began to be desperate for I could never catch anybody, and too many were involved for me to be able to punish them all, even if all were apprehended.

The pupils' unruliness increased during the next two days until the young teacher could not maintain even the appearance of authority.

> I stood in front and tried to watch everything that went on. Following the advice of an older friend, I tried to bluff the boys by looking at them and writing names on a slip of paper. For a while it looked as if the ruse might work. But the boys must have known that I did not know their names, and they were having too much fun to be easily dissuaded. I was beginning to be frightened, for I knew that my professional career was at stake . . . Evidently all doubt that I was fair game had been removed. There was disorder of every kind, talking, laughing, throwing paper wads, and moving about the room, but the most troublesome thing was that they kept throwing those inkwells around the room.

Finally the teacher was totally defeated.

> The fifth and last day of my torture came. It was pandemonium that day from the first bell on. I was perfectly helpless, and saw nothing to do but stand up and take my punishment. The inkwells were flying faster than ever. I tried to make a plea, but it was unheard. I couldn't make my voice carry above the din. I smiled grimly and settled down to hold on for the forty-five minutes. There were signs that the more timid boys were genuinely concerned about the danger they ran. One boy was hit and had to go out of the room with a slight cut over his eye. An inkwell came very close to my head. Midway of the hour a boy got up, looked at me indignantly, and cried out, "I'm not going to stay in here any longer." Then he fled from the room. A dozen others rose and started to follow him. I stood in front of the door as if to bar their exit. Then the whole assembly room arose and rushed angrily out of the room, whooping and stamping their feet. I did not try to stop them. I was glad that it was over.

Such a breakdown of authority tells us something about the structure of authority itself. If a legitimate command is given and is disobeyed, such overt defiance directly challenges the authority holder's position. Successful defiance is cumulative. Once the teacher "loses control," disobedience escalates until the structure of authority itself disintegrates. Teachers in traditional schools who worry about asserting their authority for its own sake, and who regard keeping control of the class as their first order of business, are, as Waller points out, responding realistically to the kind of authority they hold. If not jealously guarded and continually reasserted, it collapses in ruins.

Loss of authority, then, has two components. The first is a loss of power —of the threat of effective sanctions. The second, and the most central element in the absence of authority at Group High and Ethnic High, is the dissolution of those very claims to a special status and a set of legitimate rules in which the right to command resides. The two corresponding patterns seen with the loss of authority are defiance, on the one hand, and, on the other, the dismantling of authoritative statuses and rights altogether.

Although they technically retained residual legal authority, teachers at Group High and Ethnic High had effectively given up the right to punish or reward students. The "ultimate" sanctions traditional schools employ—grades, diplomas, and as a last resort, truancy laws and the police—were also, in theory, available to Group High and Ethnic High. But such sanctions had become ineffective in regulating day-to-day relations between teachers and students.

Students at Ethnic High, like students in the regular high school, received grades every six weeks, while Group High had won the right to grade students only at the end of each semester. But in both schools, grades were negotiated between teachers and students during the last day or two of a marking period (the last week at Group High), playing almost no role in teacher-student relationships during the rest of the term. At Group High teachers gave students personal written evaluations, but this was a reciprocal process in which students also evaluated the class and their teachers. At Ethnic High grading standards were lax, so that minimal compliance—spending an hour at the end of a marking period dashing off one assignment —was sufficient to earn a satisfactory grade. Students could often wheedle or cajole teachers to act as their allies, to give them grades to pacify a parent, to improve the student's chances of leniency from juvenile court, or to "help out" a student applying for car insurance. Thus in both Group High and Ethnic High, teachers retained the formal power to give grades—and they of course retained the ultimate power to call down the full weight of broader legal sanctions such as suspension from school and the intervention of truant officers and police. But although these ultimate sanctions no doubt underlay the overall balance of power between teachers and students, in the day-to-day life of the school these sanctions were not usable. Students

might spend a day or two at the end of a marking period "seeing about my grades," but this process was divorced from the ordinary interactions of teachers and students. Teachers had to find means other than the threat of sanctions and the invocation of authority to win student cooperation.

The free school situation, although it softened the impact of defiance and defeat, also made teachers more vulnerable. Since coercive sanctions were illegitimate, a teacher who was unable to lead without authority was unable to lead at all. Thus when Luis, a part-time Chicano teacher of race relations at Ethnic High, lost the respect and good will of his students, he could take no refuge in his role as a teacher. Throughout the first six weeks of the semester, students complained that Luis's class was boring and that he was hostile to students. One day when I observed his class, Luis proposed a topic of discussion, and a student said, "Come on, you don't know anything about that." Then he tried to raise a new subject—a field trip the class had been planning to take. Other students said, "How come you're always promising us trips and we never go?" When Luis offered justifications for why there had been no field trips, students laughed with open scorn. As a final effort to regain initiative and punish the class, Luis said ominously, "There's a lot of racism in this class. I'd like to talk about that." A Chicano student said contemptuously, "Racism. What racism are you talking about?"[1] A few weeks later, after the Ethnic High directors had tried without success to mediate between Luis and the students, Luis was fired.

Luis's class was a disastrous failure, even by the lax standards of Ethnic High. But it was the free school situation that made Luis vulnerable. He could claim no special treatment because of his role; he could demand neither deference nor obedience. Students were bored, and they taunted him with such questions as "So Luis, what are we going to do today?" When students challenged him openly, he had no effective sanctions with which to force them into submission. Unlike the young teacher in Waller's example, Luis could identify his tormentors, but he could not do anything to them.

Such failures of authority were a continuing possibility for alternative school teachers, even those who were well liked by students. Janet, a teacher at Ethnic High, was popular with students, but she could seldom obtain compliance with even a direct command. Sometimes students willingly engaged in discussion or answered questions, but just as often they ignored her, even when spoken to directly. They did not attack her or try to humiliate her; they simply pretended she was not there. In a typical class, for example, Janet was reading aloud from a book while several students talked in low voices, others read magazines or thumbed through books, and two students worked together on their math workbooks. She asked the class what a particular word meant, but no one answered, so she explained the word and went on reading. It was only when Thomas, who had come in

1. Quotations from school participants are taken directly from my field notes.

quite late, began talking and laughing very loudly with friends that she attempted to assert control. When Janet came to the phrase "delusions of grandeur," she stopped and asked Thomas what it meant. He said, "What do you think it means?" Janet said, "I asked you. What do you think it means?" Thomas laughed and repeated, "What do you think it means?" Janet said, "Okay, you weren't listening. I'll tell you what it means." She then went back to her reading while Thomas continued talking to his friends. Such direct defiance, however, was relatively unusual. More often Janet would talk casually or joke with students throughout the hour, without ever beginning a formal lesson or making demands on students. In this case we see defiance shading off into the second form of the loss of authority: relinquishing of the claim to authority.

Dissolving the Sphere of Authority

How should we describe a situation in which commands are not given, so that the test of strength between teachers and students never arises? Defiance, I have argued, has peculiar dynamics: loss of control, the inability to enforce the right to command, undermines the special status or role of the authority holder, and thus defiance escalates in a destructive cycle.

But in the free schools I studied, these dynamics were largely absent. Instead, since teachers made no claim to authority, they ceased thereby to protect a special status, a special sphere of rights and obligations in which the right to command rested. Teachers lacked authority, but they were not subject to the escalating challenges that go with successful defiance. When failure to command is not defined as failure by the teacher, the dynamics of authority interactions are changed. A class may be disorderly; teachers may request cooperation and not get it. But these failures do not humiliate the teacher or escalate into further challenges. The teacher is no longer the isolated actor on center stage, and students' classroom behavior is no longer the public measure of the teacher's role performance.

To obtain a clearer picture of the failure to claim authority, we may look at two classes, one at Group High and one at Ethnic High. Alice's class, in characteristic Group High style, was run as a discussion group with fairly high levels of participation and enthusiasm. Janet's class at Ethnic High was disorganized, friendly, often apathetic, and occasionally not a "class" at all. Both classes, despite their differences, illustrate the odd kind of order produced even in situations where teachers cannot assert authority.

Since Alice's women's studies class was a discussion group, responsibility for course materials or discussion topics did not rest solely with her. Alice (or a student) occasionally suggested a book the class might read, but students more often discussed whatever was on their minds on a given day. They sometimes agreed to read a particular book "for next time," but the book might well never be mentioned again. Such lapses were regarded as

part of the group's responsiveness to its members' needs and in no way constituted evidence of Alice's failure to guide the class.

The students in Alice's class initiated discussions and carried the major burden of sustaining class activity. They gave reports on books they had read, volunteered to bring in speakers, and shared problems or personal experiences. Alice contributed to these discussions, frequently talking about some personal problem of her own, but these contributions were part of her role as group participant. Neither the orderliness nor the substantive content of these class discussions were defined as tests of Alice's role as a teacher. Such a class did have a standard by which to judge success or failure: the ability of the group to generate participation and solidarity among its members (see chapter 4). But failure of the class did not mean a failure of the teacher's authority.

Members of the women's studies class occasionally made explicit, if half-joking, attacks on Alice's role as teacher, but she suffered these gladly as signs of students' commitment to the class. Once, for example, the class was going to discuss "the direction the group should take." There was some hesitation at the beginning of the discussion and Alice said, "Should I start it off?" to which a student replied, "No, you should go last. I don't want to be influenced by what you say." On another occasion Betty came to class to ask her fellow students whether she might miss class that day to go to the park. (The class had agreed that members could skip only with group permission.) Alice objected, saying she would rather Betty not miss class. However, the students said, "Go. You'll have a better time there than here." One student added, "Don't listen to her. She's just your teacher," and Betty went off to the park.

Alice was not without influence, despite the students' self-conscious rejection of her authority. They liked and respected her, and her suggestions often led them to discuss new issues, to turn their attention to problems of the internal workings of the class, or to be more careful about including all the members of the class in discussions. Alice rightly considered the class to be very successful. But the social order of the group was not based on Alice's authority. Because her status was not at stake, even direct challenges to her wishes did not produce that combination of humiliation and defeat to which traditional classroom authority is so vulnerable.

Janet's Ethnic High class in black history and culture was not a discussion group. It was organized like a traditional class except that students usually would not do assignments, participate in discussions, or on occasion even acknowledge having been spoken to. Janet, however, turned what would have been a debacle for a traditional teacher into a neutral or even pleasant situation—largely by ignoring the absence of order, participation, or academic activity. Janet often spent the first part of a class period simply chatting with students, waiting to see whether as they wandered in and out

enough might finally accumulate to constitute a class. Occasionally the whole period would drift by without the class's ever officially beginning, so that a time when Janet was responsible for what happened in the class would simply never arise. Alternatively, Janet would sometimes begin a class, describing some historical event or discussing a book students were to have read. She kept talking in a pleasant way, ignoring students who got up, left the room, chatted with friends, or slept. By ignoring those who ignored her, rather than taking their actions as a personal insult, she was able to normalize an otherwise bizarre situation. By not standing on her dignity, she was able to win students over as friends and allies. Janet's class was frequently just as disorganized and boring for students as Luis's, yet student response was very different. In class one day, Janet was talking and a student said, "Janet, know what?" Janet said, "I know, I'm disorganized." The student replied, "You said it. I didn't," and they both laughed.

One consequence of Janet's approach was that her situation did not degenerate with time. On some days she was able to cajole students into guessing at vocabulary words or discussing a book, and at the end of each six-week marking period most students would usually produce one written assignment for the class. What is more, the students liked Janet, enjoyed talking to her, and frequently came to her classroom just to socialize. Their disobedience was not meant to embarrass her, and she did not see it as a personal challenge. The disorder of her classroom did not signal failure in her role as teacher.

By not setting up a battle line and defending her authority, Janet was able to maintain a stable position in the class and a secure position in the school. Indeed, she was so popular that she was regarded as Ethnic High's most valuable teacher. Her own view of her situation was summed up nicely when she said of three older boys, who consistently teased her, ignored prepared lessons, and disrupted the class by loud joking, that they were her "special friends" who had known her since she first came to the school and "tried to help her out." She sometimes shouted at them, "You guys shut up." "LeRoy, you never shut your mouth, do you?"—but their disorderliness was just a normal part of life.

Casual Style

At Group High and Ethnic High, the absence of authority, like its presence in other organizations, was sustained by norms and values, by the existence or lack of various social props, and by diffuse expectations that guided behavior and shaped its interpretation. In particular, the casual egalitarianism of these and other free schools undermined the entire set of specialized roles and rules that traditionally identify the legitimate rights of authority holders. At the same time, chaotic informality eliminated the major symbolic domain in which authority in schools is usually exercised.

Teachers in traditional classrooms assert their authority in large part by

regulating symbolic aspects of student conduct, demanding classroom order, some minimal deference to the teacher's status, and "paying attention" (Smith and Geoffrey, 1968). A primary aim of students in alternative schools is to escape such regulation. As researchers studying Chicago's Metro School discovered, students wanted "freedom in the expressive realm: freedom to talk to friends, get up and leave if you were restless, wear what you wanted, or eat when you wanted" (Center for New Schools, 1972: 317).

At Group High and Ethnic High, such symbolic freedom eliminated conflict over deference and classroom order, thereby dissolving one of the major spheres where teachers traditionally define and assert their authority. Group High was made to look as little as possible like a real school. It lacked desks and other props of traditional classroom order. Instead, there was a motley collection of pillows, beaten-up chairs and sofas, and old mattresses. Walls, ceilings, and doors were painted with murals or decorated with strips of bright paper. And even at Ethnic High, where some traditional props such as desks were present alongside derelict sofas and chairs, the usual spirit accompanying them was absent. Students spread out wherever they were comfortable, lounging against walls, sitting on top of bookcases, sprawled on couches, or lying on the floor. Such an atmosphere blurred the distinction between attentive, respectful behavior and relaxed indifference.

Teachers at Group High and Ethnic High had also surrendered control of classroom space, the traditional territory governed by teacher authority. Classrooms were public gathering places to which teachers had no exclusive claims. Throughout classes students talked to their friends, wandered in and out of the room, read magazines, and occasionally slept or played cards without interference from the teacher. At Group High the school's core area was a single large room with removable dividers where at any one time some people might be reading or talking while others folk-danced, painted, or held a meeting. Students in a class might leave the conversational circle in the middle of a discussion, while students not enrolled in a class often hung around to listen. Neither classroom space nor teaching activities were set off by clear, defensible boundaries.

There was a similar loss of the boundaries separating teacher and student roles. Interactional reciprocity was taken for granted, not only in the use of first names but in the offhand style and easy familiarity of students' claims on teachers' attention. These free schools had shed such obvious symbols of teacher authority as requiring students to raise their hands to be recognized before speaking, but students and teachers also considered each other's private lives fair conversational game. Furthermore, teachers no longer closed ranks, restricting information and loyalty within the teacher group. In a way that would horrify traditional teachers (Becker, 1953), teachers included students freely in school gossip and infighting. Indeed, the homoge-

nization of teacher and student styles in dress and manners sometimes threatened to become a reversal of roles. A teacher at a Group High meeting became lost in rhetoric about "defying the system," while an earnest student asked how the school could pay its teachers if it left the public school system. Teachers joked, argued, and gossiped with students, making no attempt to pull rank. Thus the symbols of a special status, deserving deference or embodying authority, were absent. And with the symbols of authority, authority itself dissolved.

Finally, the very heart of the teacher's traditional role—educating students—was itself redefined so as to blur the distinctive functions of the teacher. Teaching in these free schools was not defined as imparting information that teachers possessed and students lacked. Rather, teachers sought to liberate or nurture students' own best selves. Indeed, this redefinition of the goal of education provided the essential justification for abandoning authority (see chapter 5). But it also constituted the ultimate sense in which teachers lacked authority: they lacked authority even over educational matters, such as what and how students were to learn.

In traditional schools, curriculum and classroom authority are intimately related. The fact that students need to learn what the curriculum teaches justifies their presence in school and provides a rationale for teachers' authority over them. In addition, the curriculum creates a structure around which the daily life of the classroom can be built (Smith and Geoffrey, 1968: 175-185). To serve these functions the curriculum must be something about which the teacher knows more than the students, and it must provide a set of routines that keeps students busy and engages them in classroom life (Lortie, 1975:151). Thus school learning is often quite different from other sorts of learning. It is more formalized and esoteric because it is the special property of teachers.

Students at Group High and Ethnic High were not supposed to learn to diagram sentences, or to finish the next chapter in their workbooks, or to analyze the oratorical devices in one of Shakespeare's plays. They were instead expected to learn about themselves, their cultural identities, and their own communities. Education was, in the hackneyed phrase of the 1960s, to be relevant. Teachers offered a great variety of courses—more than they could possibly prepare for had they sought to claim special mastery. For courses such as "Crime in the Streets" or "What is White?" or "Feminism," there was no traditional apparatus of texts and workbooks to support classroom order. But teachers did not try to assert special expertise. Even when it came to giving courses in psychology, college preparatory skills, or American history, teachers made no claim to authoritative knowledge. The real goal was to provide students with opportunities to find themselves, respect themselves, and identify with the school community. To this end, teachers taught anything students found enjoyable, stimulating, or interesting. The classes that resulted created no sphere in which teachers were supposed to define "correct" knowledge; nor could teachers claim special rights to evaluate and reward learning.

The relaxed style of Group High and Ethnic High undermined teacher authority in a double sense. First, teachers lost the right to demand order and obedience. Second, teachers lacked clear standards for student conduct or learning by which they might define and assert authority. Whether students talked or sat quietly, whether they sat up straight or slouched, whether they left the room or stayed, their behavior was not interpreted as a sign of either rebellion or compliance. Teachers and students were collaborators in a quest for personal development over which teachers could claim no institutionalized expertise. Teachers lost authority not by having students defy them but by having that set of distinctions (between rebellious and respectful demeanor, between learning and failing to learn) that they might have regulated disappear.

Organized Equality

A new relationship of students and teachers is likely to be reflected in changed arrangements for school governance. Decisions about school policy, curriculum, the structure of classes, grading, and staff hiring are critical areas where a shift toward student power should be felt. Yet one must not exaggerate the importance of structural arrangements for making decisions and allocating power in Group High and Ethnic High. As I have pointed out, symbolic issues are tremendously important in schools. At Group High and Ethnic High, the basic reworking of the authority structure had occurred in the renegotiation of the ways students and teachers treated one another. Formal arrangements—who could vote and which meetings should decide what issues—were essentially symbolic devices meant to embody the school's commitment to a new style of doing things, rather than the sources of altered authority relations.

Both Group High and Ethnic High had given students new structural sources of power. First, students chose their courses, and thus their teachers, in a kind of educational free market. Particularly at Ethnic High, where there was a shortage of students and the jobs of the part-time teachers and consultants were at stake, students "voted with their feet," or with their enrollment cards, determining the fate of the school and their teachers. Both schools were allotted staff and funding in proportion to their student enrollments, and both made real efforts to teach courses students would enjoy. At Ethnic High teachers proposed a variety of courses each term, and students voted for those they wished taught. At Group High, in a ritual celebration of the school's philosophy, both students and teachers, before the semester began, would write on sheets of paper posted all around the walls of the central meeting room titles of courses they would like to teach or have taught. Through this mutual inspiration—participatory democracy in action—the curriculum would naturally emerge.

Both schools also gave students a formal role in governance, although, as has been pointed out for other alternative schools (Center for New Schools, 1972; Graubard, 1972:112-118; Wittes, Chesler, and Crowfoot, 1975:242-267), students never have completely equal power, both because they do not participate fully in the formal channels available to them and because ultimately teachers are those held accountable by outside agencies for school governance. Nonetheless, both Group High and Ethnic High sought student participation and gave students a decisive voice in important school decisions.

At Group High the principle of student power was central to the school's ideology: "Perhaps the most striking aspect of [Group High] is the partnership between staff and students. All decision-making is done by the staff and student community together, including hiring of teachers, curriculum, time scheduling, etc. A net result of this partnership is a sharing of the failures as well as the successes of the project. The staff never 'owns' school problems, but rather shares them with the students" ([Group High], 1970).

This commitment to equality was expressed in three major institutional forms: the "collectives," the intercollective council, and all-school meetings. Collectives were the major units of solidarity and participation at Group High. Each collective was organized around an interest area, and students chose a collective affiliation based on friendships with other students, attachment to the teachers affiliated with a collective, or the collective's subject area. There were four (later five) collectives, ranging from the largest, Riots and Roses, a collective of seventy students oriented toward ecology and politics, to Free Fall, a collective of thirty students emphasizing individual development and group process. Each collective used one of the large classroom spaces as a home territory where students and teachers could gather, and a period was set aside each day for collective meetings, social activities, or sports. Each collective ran its own affairs, planned outings, and discussed school issues in collective meetings.

The intercollective council was a coordinating body composed of a teacher and a student from each collective and several students elected at large. Its functions were to make recommendations, write reports, coordinate among the collectives, and carry out decisions of the all-school meeting. Ultimate power, however, rested in the all-school meeting: all important issues were discussed and decided there. Equality between teachers and students was embodied in a one-person-one-vote rule for decisions made in collective and all-school meetings. Students at these meetings had equal rights to speak, and their votes clearly outnumbered those of the teachers. They also had a majority on the intercollective council, but since the council could not make decisions, the students' overwhelming numerical advantage in the collective and all-school meetings was critical.

Commitment to the principle of equality was strong enough to make teachers and students abide by votes of school meetings even when these

were painful for the staff. During the spring of the year I spent studying Group High, for example, when the school received a supplemental budget from a private foundation, the decision as to how to spend the money was left to the all-school meeting. Budget requests had been solicited from each collective, but at the meeting a new use for the money was proposed. Sixteen student teachers, working at the school while they earned teaching credentials, requested that the money be used to pay them small salaries. The regular staff objected, saying that student teachers were supposed to be unpaid and that the new budget was meant to cover extras such as supplies, field trips, and books to enrich the school's educational program. The student teachers, however, had the sympathy of the students, and a substantial part of the budget was eventually used to pay them salaries.

The formal arrangements that gave students power did not always lead to student victories. The previous spring students had elected a director, voting out the founder of the school. In the spring of the year when I was present, the current director, Carol, was going on leave and students and staff were to vote again for her replacement. There were three candidates, but the debate focused on two, one of whom represented the free school ethos and the other of whom favored measures to increase racial integration in the school, even if this meant a somewhat more structured school with greater emphasis on basic skills. The outgoing director favored the "integrationist" candidate, one of Group High's own teachers. But the students voted for unstructured schooling, electing an outsider who gave a stirring speech about alternative education and his experience teaching and doing research on free schools. His election precipitated a crisis.

The director announced that as a matter of personal conscience she could not take the school's decision before the school board for approval because hiring a white teacher from outside the Berkeley schools would mean asking for an exception to the district's policy of a freeze on nonminority hiring. She acknowledged that she was obligated to abide by the school's decision and said that if she were explicitly directed to do so, she would submit the request to the district as the school's agent but without adding her personal support. Her argument turned not on her right to override the students' decision but on the claim that it was immoral to "ask the district to make a special exception, hire another white, just so our school can have the director we want."

Students were angry that they had not known the full situation before they voted. They had chosen their favorite candidate and now were put in the awkward position of either backing down from their own choice or following a course that was unlikely to succeed and that they themselves now saw as "racist." They had been persuaded by the director's arguments, but they did not want to give up their right to make the decision. Finally, with a great deal of grumbling, the students decided to hold a new election, and the "integrationist" teacher from within the school was elected.

As this incident showed, teachers still retained certain significant advantages despite the avowed principle of student power. The first derived from their greater responsibility for the practical details of running the school. It was invariably a teacher who drafted a grant proposal, arranged for planning the next year's classes, or prepared one of the long evaluations required by funding agencies. The team that studied the Metro School observed the same student reluctance to work for effective power. Students had achieved their major goals—expressive freedom and the right to criticize and be heard—and they did not find it worth the extra effort to take an active part in school decision making (Center for New Schools, 1972). Group High's students did participate in making decisions, and a few were consistently very active. However, most of the drudgery, and the power that went with it, remained in the province of the teachers.

The second advantage possessed by the teachers became clear when the school was dealing with outside groups. In these external relations, teachers held ultimate power because they were acknowledged by outside agencies as the responsible administrators of the school. In the election described above, the director was in a position to block the school's collective decision because the school board would accept requests for new staff positions only if she officially presented them.

Group High tried to overcome some of these limitations. For example, it insisted, over the vehement objections of the Berkeley High School principal, on sending a team made up of equal numbers of teachers and students to negotiate course accreditation. Much as the principal disliked having to deal directly with students, he was forced to do so. Even in this case, of course, student power was ultimately dependent upon the teachers' commitment to the principle of equality. Yet teachers stuck by the principle even when it hurt them to do so. Both teachers and students seemed, in fact, to relish incidents in which students opposed teachers and won. These events vindicated the school's conception of itself as a community of equals.

Ethnic High, although it was considerably less successful than Group High in involving students in the formal aspects of school governance, frequently sought student participation. Thus there were all-school meetings, evaluations of teachers after each marking period, and an open invitation to students to attend staff meetings. But all this produced little student involvement, except when students were upset about something, and then their demands carried great weight. We have seen that Luis was fired when students complained about his course; other part-time teachers were let go when they failed to attract enough student enrollment. At a large school meeting, students complained about a teacher's teaching style. He answered them as best he could, explaining his philosophy of teaching, but when other students tried to defend him, another teacher intervened to insist that the students had a right to have the kind of teaching they wanted. Since some students preferred his style, the solution was to hire a second teacher, so that each student faction could learn African dance in a way it found congenial.

At both Group High and Ethnic High, teachers took pleasure in student self-assertion. Participation was considered a virtue, not a threat to teacher authority. So although teachers ultimately held some of the crucial levers of power, particularly in relations with the world outside the school, both in classrooms and within the school community teachers gave up authority to students. Even the occasional student victories that directly opposed immediate teacher interests (challenging a teacher's performance or voting to pay the Group High student teachers from the school budget) gave both teachers and students satisfaction: they were signs of success in the school's basic mission of making students equals of their teachers.

This self-conscious pleasure taken in student victories underlines a contradiction behind both the practical and symbolic assertion of equality between teachers and students. Despite the ideal of equality, students and teachers valued differences even while attacking them. Students wanted to be equal to *teachers*, not to just anyone. It was the existence of two statuses that gave the drama of equality its excitement. Even when there were reversals, or when the dénouement varied from performance to performance, the tension of making unequals equal provided the plot and the central action of the free school drama.

This ambivalence or ambiguity is common, I think, to many contemporary experimental organizations which are innovative in giving groups with different organizational statuses a chance to work together on new terms but do not abolish these statuses altogether. For example, a mental hospital that became a "therapeutic community" (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1957) equalized the doctor-patient relationship to encourage a free flow of therapeutic help among patients as well as from doctors to patients. But a new relationship to authority was itself an important part of the therapy. Many patients' problems were "based on misconceptions about authority figures who are seen as rejecting or repressive." The therapeutic community was beneficial because it was a "situation in which patients cannot reasonably attribute malevolent motivation to authority figures" (p. 130). Democratization not only allowed patients interaction with their equals; more important, patients learned to relate as equals to doctors who also had authority over them. To some degree, experimental organizations such as free schools achieve their "therapeutic" effects precisely by keeping old distinctions intact enough so that people can learn to violate them. It was by practicing equality with teachers *as teachers* that students at Group High learned new patterns of group organization.

The meaning of equality between teachers and students was somewhat different at Ethnic High. Although students enjoyed egalitarian, friendly relations with their teachers, they were not eager to abolish authority relations in general. Yet the convergence of students' habitual disobedience with

teachers' aspirations for equality nonetheless produced an organization without authority. As we shall see in chapter 3, Ethnic High's students often seemed to be asking that their teachers act more authoritatively even while they resisted teachers' attempts to exert control. Students at Ethnic High appreciated the added dignity that came from not being treated as subordinates, but they were ambivalent about the experience of equality with those who should have had authority over them. Although freedom from authority was pleasant, Ethnic High's students did not seek, as an end in itself, training in how to violate traditional expectations about authority.

The Absence of Authority

We are now ready to return to our original question: what is the "absence of authority"? We have seen the complex reasons why teachers lost authority: formal equality reduced their power, traditional sanctions were illegitimate, they no longer claimed special mastery over curriculum content, and the casual free school atmosphere put most student behavior outside the scope of teacher control. But in what sense does this constitute an absence of authority, rather than simply defiance or a breakdown of authority?

It is impossible to define "authority" without considering its relationship to other forms of power and influence. The maintenance of authority clearly depends, ultimately, on power. We have seen, for example, that without the ability to sanction students, free school teachers were unable to maintain authority. Authority relies on power, but changes its organization.[2]

Authority is not simply the ability to influence another's behavior. It is a special kind of influence which is differentiated from the ongoing flow of

2. Max Weber (1964) distinguished three concepts: power, the generalized ability to affect the behavior of others; authority, the capacity to command; and legitimacy, the system of beliefs on the basis of which commands are "voluntarily" obeyed. Weber's distinction between power and authority, and his discussion of legitimacy, have been the source of continuing academic controversy over the degree to which authority necessarily implies legitimacy and thus voluntary obedience (Parsons, 1937; Bendix, 1960; Blau, 1963; Collins, 1968; Cohen et al., 1975). The debate over the "voluntary" character of obedience to authority has distracted sociologists from other important aspects of the relations between power, authority, and legitimacy. Power and authority *are* different, but not because one is backed up by sanctions while the other relies on voluntary obedience. Both authority and power rest on incentives and sanctions, and authority is often obeyed even by those who do not accept its legitimacy. But authority is power that has been institutionalized, so that people know from whom commands may be expected, and which commands will be backed by effective sanctions. For example, a worker who obeys his boss may do so primarily out of fear of losing his job. But his boss exercises authority in the sense that the worker knows the rules within which the boss can be expected to exercise his power. Disobeying the foreman will get the worker fired, unless the foreman has just been fired himself. Such compliance is not "voluntary," but it is organized into an institutionalized pattern. Similarly, legitimacy does not ensure voluntary obedience. Servants of a traditional ruler, or citizens of a legal-rational state, will struggle with their rulers to get as much freedom from control as their bargaining position allows. But the types of legitimate authority shape the form of this struggle, the channels into which the power resources of each side will be funneled.

more or less spontaneous cooperation, based on either self-interest, attachment, or coercion. Authority involves a specialized sphere, and a set of roles, persons, or rules that embody the right to command, decide, or judge. It is an exposed, explicit organization of power, set off against a whole set of informal understandings about how much people will or must cooperate with one another without being asked. It defines a realm in which there is a need for and a source of commands.

As a process authority occurs in two stages: first, power is used to establish and defend a special status from which authoritative commands or judgments can be given. Once consolidated, this status becomes a source of additional influence. Authority is then exercised by giving commands that can be backed up with power (sanctions). When power is translated into authority, its dynamics are altered. Every act of compliance or disobedience has a dual significance: it reflects the balance of power between ruler and ruled, but it also contributes either to strengthening or to weakening the special sphere and status in which authority resides. Authority is cumulative, so that one effective command smooths the way for the next. But authority is also especially fragile and subject to disruption since a failure of authority can lead to a collapse of the positions or rules specializing in command.

Group High and Ethnic High abolished authority in the sense that they systematically dismantled the specialized sphere and the distinctive roles upon which authority depends. Although they recognized teachers and students as separate groups, they denied that any special rights or obligations attached to these statuses. Teachers could lead group activities, give advice, or make suggestions, but they could not lay claim to special rights in doing so. Teachers, like students, had to base their claims on others upon their needs as individuals or their interests as members of the school, not on their roles as teachers. If they had functional superiority, they could use it to gain leverage or control. But they could not claim influence because of their status. (Indeed, as we have seen, teachers who made claims to authority as teachers were rebuffed; they were in essence told that they were just like everyone else.)

It is as if in the school, the training ground for norms and rituals of authority in our culture, students and teachers tried to say, "This is not a special place; we can lie around just as if we were in our own living room. There is not a special kind of business called school work; we are interested in everything. There are no special names, forms of address, or styles of interaction appropriate here. Teachers are people who must make appeals to students and to each other on the basis of their individual traits—a love of music, hatred of disorder, selfishness—but not on the basis of their status as teachers." For Group High and Ethnic High, this blurring of the line between the world of the school and the outside world, between people's relations in the school and their other social relations, and between the tone of school life and that of "ordinary" life, is precisely where the attack on authority focused.