POLITICAL ECONOMY OF AMERICAN EDUCATION:
Democratic Citizenship in the Heart of Empire

Dissertation

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Abstract

Chief among the goals of American education is the cultivation of democratic citizens. Contrary to State catechism delivered through our schools, America was not born a democracy; rather it emerged as a republic with a distinct bias against democracy. Nonetheless we inherit a great demotic heritage. Abolition, the labor struggle, women’s suffrage, and Civil Rights, for example, struck mighty blows against the established political and economic power of the State. State political economies, whether capitalist, socialist, or communist, each express characteristics of a slave society. All feature oppression, exploitation, starvation, and destitution as constitutive elements. In order to survive in our capitalist society, the average person must sell the contents of her life in exchange for a wage.

Fundamentally, I challenge the equation of State schooling with public and/or democratic education. Our schools have not historically belonged to a democratic public. Rather, they have been created, funded, and managed by an elite class wielding local, state, and federal government as its executive arms. Schools are economic institutions, serving a division of labor in the reproduction of the larger economy.

Rather than the school, our workplaces are the chief educational institutions of our lives. Here we spend the bulk of our time and efforts. Our jobs constitute our deepest point of political impact upon society. As Adam Smith and Karl Marx both recognized, people are formed by their ordinary employments; our daily habits and modes of association determine who we are. Thus the character of our workplaces, whether democratic, autocratic, or theocratic, serves as the best barometer for the character of our culture.

Since the late-19th century, capitalist industry has sought to transform the worker into the beast of burden whose primary life function is to labor for the enlargement of capital. Hence the education of daily working life, subservience to those who control our access to food, shelter, and healthcare, reproduces docility and political apathy. The rat race to “succeed” in our culture by becoming wealthy enough to escape this servility, amounts to a Spencerian contest of survival of the fittest, with capital prefigured to increase its power over the herd-like working class regardless of the contest’s winner.

Emancipation begins in the habits and relations of daily life. Capacity for democratic citizenship issues from participation in horizontal and egalitarian social structures at the local level.
Therefore the educational task of our time is to create such forms, build democratic lifeways into our schools and workplaces, and prepare to challenge the autocracy of capitalist industry. In the democratic future, freed from mechanical toil and the tyranny of imminent destitution, we will experience a new renaissance and discover the genius of our species.
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A debt of gratitude is owed to my fellow workers in whom I find faith in humankind, whose indomitable strength and solidarity lift my spirit. Most importantly, I am grateful for my parents and loving wife whose support has enabled me to thrive during this strange and wonderful period of life.
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"There is beauty in our tragedy. We are, at least, rid of some of our illusions...The most important of these illusions is that the collective life of mankind can achieve perfect justice. It is a very valuable illusion for the moment; for justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul. Nothing but such a madness will do battle with malignant power and spiritual wickedness in high places. This madness is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason. One can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done."

Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 1934

"The energy that actually shapes the world springs from emotions—racial pride, leader-worship, religious belief, love of war—which liberal intellectuals mechanically write off as anachronisms, and which they have usually destroyed so completely in themselves as to have lost all power of action."

George Orwell, “Wells, Hitler, and the World State,” 1941

Unabashedly, the following work emanates from my personal life. The attitudes, ideas, and concerns expressed are reflections of my background as well as the people with whom I spend my time and construct my worldview. Those folks’ experiences and analyses will appear throughout the dissertation. It is through the incorporation of this diversity of accounts, as well as the welcoming of challenges to my own, that I limit my aspirations for attaining objectivity. In the parlance of our times, “objectivity,” along with its kindred terms “neutrality” and “balance,” suggest occupation of the view-from-nowhere, or god’s-eye-view, as it were. They are politically-charged words with which social scientists and media magnates claim privileged access to Truth. But that presumption is based on modern bourgeois conceit and primal will to power.

Hunter Thompson characterized the creed of objectivity best in his obituary for Richard Nixon:

Some people will say that words like scum and rotten are wrong for Objective Journalism—which is true, but they miss the point. It was the built-in blind spots of the Objective rules and dogma that allowed Nixon to slither into the White House in the first place. He looked so good on paper that you could almost vote for him sight unseen. He seemed so all-American, so much like Horatio Alger, that he was able to slip through the cracks of Objective
Journalism. You had to get Subjective to see Nixon clearly, and the shock of recognition was often painful.3

Although Nixon eventually proved himself a “monster straight out of Grendel,” he appealed through the media to the public as a sort of American hero, an honest and virtuous man of common stock who had overcome great odds to achieve success.4

Conceived as “the great equalizer” and “the great panacea,” school breathes life into the bloated corpse of the American Dream. Educational laity and priesthood alike offer aid and courage to the myth of a better future to be won through the pursuit of academic achievement. Behind this soothing veneer is institutionalized a game of survival of the fittest, in which each step taken toward the horizon of success serves the darker purposes of our modern rulers. As inmates of a carceral society we learn not to resist our captors, and resign instead to fighting amongst ourselves for the scraps of their feast.

Although I intend in this dissertation to stick closely to the empirical ground, I acknowledge that myth dwells as a constitutive element of our terrain. Part of my challenge will be to hold fact and myth in balance while simultaneously disentangling them. Theoretical and methodological schemes prove blunt tools for accomplishing this. Therefore, without departing from the empirical world, the story that I am about to unfold should carry an aesthetic and narrative tone, hopefully capable of imparting meaning to the educational experiences of our lives.

My personal story is that I am the son and grandson of two generations of veteran schoolteachers who fought for autonomy and respect from principals and politicians. I am the great-grandson of railworkers who battled for their livelihoods against police, strikebreakers, and Pinkerton thugs. The struggles of those teachers and railworkers are not so different. Both are symptomatic of the larger maladies plaguing the American political economy.

Despite living a working-class life of going to a job every day, taking my orders from a boss, and scraping by, paycheck to paycheck, it was a university fellowship that afforded me the leisure to type this manifesto. That fellowship was made possible by the small and frequently unwilling contributions of countless workers who remain to me nameless and faceless. I hope to do them justice by making this opportunity count.

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1 Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), 22.

Hunter Thompson, “He Was a Crook,” *Rolling Stone* (June 16, 1994), 42-44.

A portion of this paragraph appeared in my previously-published essay, “Middle-Class Curriculum and the Failure of Achievement,” *Bajo Palabra: Revista de Filosofía*, Epoca II, No. 6 (2011), 99-100. The description of Nixon as a “monster straight out of Grendel” comes from Thompson’s obituary; it is a reference to the post-Watergate revelations of criminal activity at the highest level of government office, in the context of the Nixon’s assertion that “when the President does it, that means that it is not illegal.” David Frost Interview with Richard Nixon, *New York Times* (May 20, 1977), A16.
INTRODUCTION:

DEMOCRACY, EDUCATION, AND THE STATE

“As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy.”

Abraham Lincoln, 1858

“Without democracy in industry, that is where it counts most, there is no such thing as democracy in America.”

Walter Lippmann, Drift and Mastery, 1914

“Democracy is to me a way of life and a gospel for the salvation of the world.”

Boyd Bode, in his address to the 4th Annual Bode Conference, Ohio State University, 1949

Democratic citizenship stands tall among the aims of American education. However, contrary to the State catechism administered through our schools, the United States was not born a democracy. Most of the Founding Fathers feared democracy as a threat to their republic and therefore instituted mechanisms to check its influence. Great demotic moments in our nation’s history—abolition, women’s suffrage, labor unions, and Civil Rights—arrived as challenges to the established political and economic power of the State. Here ordinary folks found ways to live beyond the daily struggle for survival and instantiate themselves as threats to a system that had excluded and disenfranchised them. By making trouble and causing disruptions, a fugitive demos transformed itself from an object of power into an agent of history. Most importantly, then, I want to challenge the equation of State schooling with public and/or democratic education. Outside of transgressive episodes, our schools as a whole have not historically belonged to a democratic public. Instead they have been created, funded, and managed by an elite class wielding local, state, and federal government as its executive arms.

Historically and currently, the school serves an institutional division of labor in the reproduction of our larger political economy. Emerging during a time of great social upheaval, schools aided the rise of capitalism from the ashes of feudalism. Just as feudalism serves as a useful
shorthand term by which to name and characterize the society of our medieval ancestors, *capitalism* best captures the structure and character of our own society. While the differences between these two modes of living are important, I will stress continuity between them. Both are iterations of the *State*. Evolutionary cousin to the hive, pack, and tribe, the State organizes a small class of elites who dominate the masses and steer the ship of the nation. Each of its 20th-century forms, whether capitalist, socialist, or communist, has featured slavery, exploitation, starvation, and destitution as constitutive elements. Because democracy’s nature is subversive, a defining measure of democratic citizenship is a people’s capacity to challenge these injustices. As I write this, millions in China, Russia, India, and elsewhere are standing together in solidarity against State tyranny. Over the past year we have seen the demotic spirit emerge in the Middle East and stir even here at home, in the heart of global empire.

Fred Goodman, emeritus professor of education at the University of Michigan, believes that games teach valuable lessons about how to live intelligently in the world. All games, Goodman points out, are constituted by rules. For instance, the board game Monopoly consists in buying up property and charging rents until there is literally no spot on the board that does not require payment. In a “free market” situation, players mutually enforce these rules without compelling the actions of any other. Hence the rules come to appear just as immutable as the physical laws of nature. Should players fail to follow these basic constitutive rules, then *ipso facto*, they cease to play the game of Monopoly. Goodman writes that “Games are worthy of attention because once people accept the central assumptions...the way they function is governed almost completely by the rules embedded in them.”

This dissertation attempts to articulate how, through the course of daily life, we reproduce a political-economic game whose rules, roles, and structures educate particular sorts of human persons. Developing Hegel’s idea that institutions cultivate people in their image, Dewey called for schools to be organized so as to give students the chance to practice democracy in their daily lives. Local, participatory cultivation of democratic lifeways, Dewey insisted, was prerequisite to any discussion of large-scale democracy. Departing from received academic wisdom, I take the workplace, rather than the school, to be the primary educational institution of our lives. Modern people devote the bulk of their time and efforts to a job. The economic sphere of daily life, where we work and what we consume, constitutes our deepest point of political impact upon society. Therefore the character of our working lives, whether democratic, autocratic, or theocratic, for example, offers the best barometer for the spirit of our larger culture. In what is perhaps a foreboding statement, 25 percent of the American labor force describes its workplace as a dictatorship.
Rather than educating citizens for democracy, our State-capitalist political economy reproduces a slave society of persons forced to sell the contents of their lives for a wage in order to survive. Therefore, the educational task of our time is the cultivation of citizens capable of practicing democracy in their daily lives and liberating themselves from enslavement by rendering the State redundant. A State-less society entails a citizenry capable of upholding the duties and responsibilities necessary for the healthy maintenance of life in the absence of the coercive direction of capitalists and State apparatuses. Toward that end, this dissertation will suggest a language for a new game, played out through the course of daily life, in which the working class, rather than competing against itself, unites to fight for the democratization of industry and the end of the capitalist wage system.

The dissertation’s outline proceeds as follows. Chapter One attempts to triangulate upon our present circumstance. After looking at Georg Hegel’s Master-Slave Dialectic, I will step outside the Western ideological paradigm by consulting the analyses developed by peasant cultures upon their first encounters with capitalism. These analyses allow us to see our lives in fresh, disturbing, and ultimately useful ways. I also chronicle generations of fierce resistance, emanating from across the political and ideological spectra, to the imposition of capitalist modes of production in America. It is only after a long process of theft, violence, and finally education, that our culture has learned to accept the rules of this game that now dominates our collective life. Many of these analyses, both from abroad and from American history, have understood wage labor as a form of enslavement.

Chapter Two chronicles the “Conquest of Bread,” the brutal historical process by which our ancestors were compelled to accept the condition of wagedom. This course entailed the reincarnation of the old monarchical and feudal State into the modern capitalist State. Randolph Bourne, a student of Charles Beard at Columbia University, first formulated the concept of the State during WWI. Charles Cooley once wrote that “The ‘significance’ of an artist means, I suppose, his contribution to a culture of which his work is a part, so that to understand it you must understand him.” Bourne provides a unique lens for comprehending the dynamic of the American political economy. His critical engagement with the developments of the early-20th century remains indispensable for appreciating our culture’s pubescence and the spiritual deformities with which that period has left us.

Chapter Three argues that the principal end of any economic mode of production is persons rather than commodities. In the predominant educational relationship of modernity, capital has sought to reduce labor to the status of a thing, a unit of production whose ultimate life function is to toil for the enlargement of capital. Just as plantation owners of the antebellum South treated their slaves as animals, so capital, aided by the modern sciences of Psychology and Management, have sought progressively to transform the wageworker into a beast of burden.
Chapter Four turns specifically toward schooling, contending that this institution serves a division of labor in the reproduction of the larger capitalist political economy. Schools have been shaped and continue to be dominated by the same forces and logics that constitute our other economic institutions. Thus, their *modus operandi* has been twofold: first, the conditioning of useful workers; and second, the reproduction of social relations conducive to capital’s extraction of surplus value from labor.

Chapters Five and Six argue that the converging life functions of consumption and production constitute our grand contemporary horizon of citizenship. Pursuit of this horizon according to the rules of our political economy, as well as pursuit of academic achievement according to the game of American schooling, quiets civic engagement while fueling the global corporate leviathan. Another form of citizenship, following the best of our rich democratic heritage, will democratize consumption and production by wresting each from the capitalist State’s logic of scarcity.

Chapter Seven contends that the realization of a more democratic world will require us to articulate, challenge, and rewrite the rules of our political economy, particularly in their local aspects. If schools are to be enlisted in the purposeful training of the immense sort of intelligence that this demands, they will have to be accordingly freed from the oppressive grip of capital. However, even if we could democratize the schools, most students would still be forced upon graduation to sell themselves into the despotic fiefdom of some corporation. Therefore, we have to talk about education and the economy, school and work, all together at once.

Chapter Eight examines schools, workplaces, and educators from among our contemporary and historical record who demonstrate profound understanding of our situation and suggest ways of responding to it. For example, a century ago in the public schools of Gary, Indiana and in Mississippi’s Civil Rights Era Freedom Schools, we find educators equipping young men and women with the tools and habits of mind necessary for carving democratic lifeways into our venomous industrial jungle. Elsewhere, folks have sought the cultivation of citizens through participatory workplace governance. By learning and practicing democratic habits and attitudes in industry, men and women have resurrected the public ethos of solidarity and pointed the way toward the abolition of wage slavery.

Considering the wealth of modern technology, 10-20 hours of work per week, per able-bodied person, could provide the basic comforts and necessities of life for all. Once freed from having to waste the majority of the creative and productive energies of our lives at jobs contributing to the aims and purposes of corporate masters, we will be left facing Buckminster Fuller’s question: “What is it that I was so interested in before I was told that I had to earn a living?” The answer to that question, coming from millions and then billions of persons liberated from mechanical toil, will,” as Robert
Anton Wilson suggested, “make the Renaissance look like a high school science fair or a Greenwich Village art show.”

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3 Boyd Bode, Greetings to the 4th Annual Bode Conference (Ohio State University, Summer, 1949).

4 For example, in December of 2011, villagers of Wukan, in China’s Guangdong province, drove out 1000 riot police after four days of battle. The villagers were protesting government land seizures and the recent death of an elder at the hands of police. Initial protests began in September when residents discovered that government officials were selling off their farmland to developers with plans to build factories. “Down with corrupt officials,” read one protester’s sign. “Give us back our land,” read another. Although police fired teargas and water cannons at them for the duration of the siege, the villagers held firm. Police resorted to keeping local fishing boats at bay and otherwise choking off food supplies in hopes that Wukan would surrender in hunger. Source: “Chinese village besieged after protests”, *Al Jazeera* (December 15, 2011), http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2011/12/201112152525748843.html. In May of 2012, more than 50 thousand Bangladeshi garment workers took to the streets after a boss “disappeared” a recalcitrant employee. These lowest-paid garment workers in the world have a history of battling State police who support their bosses in struggles over conditions and wages. Source: Red Marriott, “Return of the repressed; new days of rage for garment workers – and the disappeared…” *Libcom* (May 27, 2012), http://libcom.org/news/return-repressed-new-days-rage-garment-workers-disappeared-27052012.


6 Fred Goodman, “Fict, Fact, Funct Wheel” (lost citation).


CHAPTER ONE:

WAGE SLAVERY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Introduction

“It is too little realized, even by Socialists—especially by Marxians—that the whole question of the control of industry is not economic but ethical. The attempt to found ‘justice’ on the theory of value revives the old conception of individual natural right in its least defensible form.”


“The idea that workable small-unit democracy is possible within larger-unit systems of economic production is alien to the shared presumptions of ‘progress’ that unite capitalists and communists in a religious brotherhood.”

Lawrence Goodwyn, The Populist Moment, 1978

The role of wage laborer, as constitutive element of our modern life, has received no great challenge for the past century. Born into a world where wagedom proliferates, in which our friends and family members before us sell themselves for a wage, we do not learn to question. Yet resistance abounds. Many who have worked for a boss can share stories of resentment, work slowdowns, or deliberate sabotage. Although most of us find exhilaration in honest toil and satisfaction in its fruits, we dislike the regimentation and subordination experienced in our jobs. Dread overcomes us each night as we lie in bed, anticipating another day of bondage. But we are not alone.

Folks unaccustomed to wagedom do not accept it as natural. By stepping into their analyses, we can gain a new set of eyes indispensable for achieving our common emancipation. I begin by examining Hegel’s master-slave narrative, developed out of the Haitian slave revolt of 1791 and considered in the political and intellectual context of the world revolutions of the late-18th century. Next I look to peasant cultures of the 20th century who resisted capitalism and its attendant wage relation of production as drastic infringements upon their way of life. Following this, I offer a more systematic explanation of the capitalist mode of production emanating from the Western, and particularly Marxist, intellectual tradition. Finally, I turn to the long 19th century, in which Americans
of all political and ideological stripes fought their own battles against wagedom and in so doing made their final stand for the ideal of participatory democracy.

**Hegel’s Master-Slave Dialectic**

“Well, my dear reader, this battle with Mr. Covey—undignified as it was, and as I fear my narration of it is—was the turning point in my ‘life as a slave.’ It rekindled in my breast the smouldering embers of liberty; it brought up my Baltimore dreams, and revived a sense of my own manhood. I was a changed being after that fight. I was NOTHING before; I WAS A MAN NOW. It recalled to life my crushed self-respect and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be a FREEMAN. A man, without force, is without the essential dignity of human. Human nature is so constituted, that it cannot HONOR a helpless man, although it can PITY him; and even this it cannot do long, if the signs of power do not arise. He only can understand the effect of this combat on my spirit, who has himself incurred something, hazarded something, in repelling the unjust and cruel aggressions of a tyrant.”

Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855

The Western Enlightenment ushered an unprecedented ebullience of thought regarding human freedom, along with slavery as a conceptual counterweight. By the 18th century, writes Susan Buck-Morss, “slavery had become the root metaphor of Western political philosophy, connoting everything that was evil about power relations.” During the century prior, Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651) cast man in the state of nature as an essentially solitary creature struggling to gain power and dominance in the world. Slavery appeared to arise as a natural result of this struggle in which human beings sought to use each other as instruments for the ends of their own pleasure. Out of the war of all against all, Hobbes believed that stronger beings would inevitably conquer and dominate the weaker. As each “attempts to get another man into his absolute power and use [him] as he pleases,” he will ultimately “make [of him] a slave.” This ontology of the human provided a foundational political and economic ideology for the liberal democracies that grew out of the world revolutions of the late-18th century.

According to David Brion Davis, revolutionary American colonialists understood themselves literally as slaves because they were being taxed without consent and had lost the power to resist this particular form of oppression, which they feared would lead ultimately to tyranny. Today much of the world, and Americans particularly, look to the Declaration of Independence (1776), the manifesto left by those revolutionaries, as a spiritual anchor for the values of liberty and freedom. It seems a contradiction, or at least a sad accident of history, that this document did not apply to the many African-American slaves inhabiting the country at the time. This was no contradiction, however.
Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government* (1689), the inspirational precursor to Jefferson’s Declaration, envisioned a liberal society for merchants and capitalists such as himself, fueled by slave labor. The American founders, most of whom were wealthy slave-owners and landholders, looked to their slaves not as fellow humans entitled to liberty, but as a lesser beings conquered in the war of all against all. Masters claimed property rights over their slaves as they would any other beast of burden. Soon this same logical and moral cesspool would confront the French Revolution and force its sages observer to reject the erstwhile compatibility of liberty and slavery.

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The French revolutionaries understood themselves as slaves to the institutions of feudalism. Like their American counterparts and the rest of the world infected by the ideas of the Enlightenment, they claimed for themselves certain rights as individuals independent from any State authority. However, by 1792, the revolution clearly belonged to the Jacobin bourgeoisie, which had appropriated and directed its energy to fill the power vacuum left by the collapsing feudal order. This bourgeoisie, holding a disproportionate share of land and wealth, worked to enshrine private property into the laws of the new republic and to effectively align itself as the preeminent State power.\(^9\)

The German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich von Hegel, followed these developments closely in the foreign press. As he saw it, rule by the bourgeoisie meant that the revolution ultimately failed to rid the country of despotism. Although defeated in the form of monarchy and feudalism, tyranny reincarnated itself in the guise of private wealth, which was borne on the backs of half a million slaves in the colony of Saint-Domingue, then operating as the richest sugar plantation in the world.\(^10\)

In 1791 the slaves of Saint-Domingue rose up to defeat their colonial masters. “Never before,” writes David Patrick Geggus, “had a slave society successfully overthrown its ruling class.”\(^11\) Hegel saw the dialectical process of history unfolding through the Hatian rebellion. As he explained in *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), slavery does not arise from a Hobbesian struggle for dominance in the state of nature. Rather, the master-slave relation results from a “battle for recognition.” Races of humans, upon confronting each other for the first time, fail to recognize each other as equals. Because neither can see a human self in the other, a battle ensues to be won not by the physically stronger party, but by he who is unafraid to die. “[I]f he will risk a wound, and not life itself,” Hegel wrote, “he becomes a slave of the other.”\(^12\) Valuing life more than freedom, the slave allows himself to be subjugated to the dominance of the fearless master.

In the slave Hegel saw the fundamental Enlightenment contradiction between personal liberty and private property. Failing to recognize the slave as a fellow human being, the master treats him as a commodity, a beast of burden whose sole life purpose is to labor. Although the slave allows this, he never relinquishes the capacity to assert his humanity and claim his liberty.\(^13\) At some point, the
awareness of master and slave shifts, with the former realizing that his material existence depends upon the labor of the slave and the latter realizing that he is an agent of history. The slave cannot be emancipated from above, Hegel insisted. In order to escape mental and spiritual bondage, he must win his own freedom by risking life in a “trial by death.”

Half a century later we see an analogous story played out in the narrative of Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). Although Douglass credited literacy with opening the doors to emancipation, he described his fist-to-fist battle with master Edward Covey—renown for his talent in breaking slaves—as the moment at which he became, in his own mind, a truly free man. Douglass describes Covey cornering him in a barn and beginning to beat him; but as the attack progressed, his resolve grew stronger. He sees in Covey’s eyes a re-cognition, and resignation, that the slave was no longer afraid and that there was nothing more he could do to restore his former subjugation. Having failed to dominate Douglass, the master walked away and never struck him again. Once more today, human beings all around the world are standing up to tyranny, unafraid to die.

Zombies and Devils: The Folklore of Capitalism

“Merely to realize that your way of living is not the only way, is to free yourself from its authority. It brings a kind of lucidity in which society is rocked by a devastating Why? Why should men who have one life to live submit to the drudgeries and vexations that we call civilization? The whole shell is strained by a wild rationality.”

*Walter Lippmann, Drift and Mastery, 1914*

“Peasants! The sugar cane degenerates one; turns one into a beast, and kills! If we don’t have land we cannot contemplate the future well-being of our children and families. Without land there can be no health, no culture, no education, nor security for us, the marginal peasants. In all these districts one finds the plots of the majority threatened by the terrible Green Monster, which is the Great Cane, the God of the landlords.”

*Peasant Broadsheet, Southern Cauca Valley, 1972*

“We are so close to the world of work that we can’t see what it does to us. We have to rely on outside observers from other times or other cultures to appreciate the extremity and the pathology of our present position.”

*Bob Black, “The Abolition of Work,” 1985*

Ever since the collapse of the sixties the zombie genre has maintained cult prominence in American cinema: *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Vengeance of the Zombies* (1973), *Return of the Living*
Dead (1985), and Zombie Apocalypse (2011), just to name a few. It may be that modern life is a zombie story, although not in the Hollywood movie sense, rather in the folk sense. The word “zombie” appears to originate from West or Central Africa with ties to slavery, capitalism, and Voodoo. Although zombie folklore precedes the introduction of capitalist modes of production, peasant cultures utilize it as an indigenous mythology for explaining, managing, and ultimately resisting wage enslavement.

In the context of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), the zombie was the symbol of the slave, an alienated human reduced to slavery. Haitians, as well as many Western and Central African tribes, believed that witches could cast spells on living men and women to capture the vital portion of their souls. Villagers described zombies as dull, possessing an absent and glazed look in their eyes. Emotionally and mentally dead, lacking will and consciousness, witches commanded the zombies as marionettes, sending them to work like robots in fields, construction sites, bakeries, or shops, serving as watchmen and keeping books. Peasants from Tanzania, Jamaica, Martinique, and Surinam accused colonialists and affluent members of their societies of hiring witches to enslave workers. Hence the zombie was a commodity, a product of the profit motive who existed to labor for the expansion of capital.

When German and British capitalists colonized banana plantations in West Cameroon during the 1930’s and 40’s, the Bakweri believed those who went to work on the plantations to be victims of a witchcraft association. In their language the word “sombi” means “to pledge” or “to pawn.” Bakweri accused the German and British owners of stimulating the avarice of local witches by paying them to turn their own kinsmen into zombies to be sent off to labor on the sugar plantations. These kinsmen became “pledges” or “pawns,” human beings reduced to commodities and exchangeable for wealth. It was not until the 1950’s, when they collectivized their plantations, along with the help of a cult of exorcists, that the Bakweri expelled their capitalist overlords and rid themselves of their zombie problem.

While zombies are and have been a way for peasant cultures to stigmatize the dehumanization of wage labor, farmers in Bolivia and Colombia employ the devil as a folk mythology for confronting and resisting proletarianization. Those compelled by circumstance to take jobs in the new company tin mines of Bolivia or sugar cane plantations of Colombia tell tales of meeting the devil on a lonely road where the two sign a contract exchanging money, in the form of wages, for the man’s soul. Although these peasants-turned-proletarians acknowledge the evil in this deal, they act to prevent it from infecting their homes and families by explicitly segregating wage money from all other money. Fearing that devil-cursed commodities will bring sterility, disease, and early death, they use their wage money exclusively for business expenses and never for food, clothing, or other household goods.
For peasant cultures around the world, capitalism and the wage relation bring increases of production and wealth at the cost of life. Although material circumstances—namely the struggle to subsist—compel peasants to become proletarians, zombie and devil folklore allow them to resist the imposition of this new way of life by defining, indicting, and psychically compartmentalizing it. In our contemporary society, such forms of resistance have been reduced to spectacle, absorbed into and neutralized by the ideological framework of State capitalism.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber wrote that peasants always resist selling themselves into wage labor because they experience it as a degradation of life. Peasants control the techniques and rhythms of work while proletarians control nothing. Mere appendages to corporate operations, they are subjugated entirely to the boss’s control. Weber also observed that a long, arduous process of “education” is required for the wage-labor attitude to be instilled in peasant peoples so that they may be efficiently assimilated into industrial modes of production. As I will explain below, such has been the historical case in the United States. From the Colonial through the Progressive Era, working people of all political and ideological stripes resisted wagedom as an assault on traditional ways of life as well as upon political ideals of liberty and equality. Only after generations spent internalizing the ideologies and mythologies of capitalism did Americans learn to accept their bondage as natural and unassailable.

Seen through the lens of folks who have not yet received this education, capitalism becomes an economic system and mode of associated living based in the daily material fact of theft and enslavement: theft because the laborer, the true producer of value, has stolen from her the lion’s share of her daily fruits; enslavement because all of the earth has become the private property of one small class. In order to subsist, the majority must sell its creative and productive capacities, its life’s potential, to a boss in exchange for a wage.

**Capitalist Political Economy**

“The idea of industrial war and the open conflict of a submerged and eternal class-hostility is no mere figure of speech. It is the only sane interpretation of this complex situation.”

*Randolph Bourne, “Law and Order,” 1912*

“Capital: its instantaneous cruelty, its incomprehensible ferocity, its fundamental immorality—that is what is scandalous…it is a monstrous unprincipled enterprise, nothing more…Capital, in fact, was never linked by a contract to the society that it dominates. It is a sorcery of social relations, it is a challenge to society, and it must be responded to as such.”

*Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, 1981*
Like all social concepts, *capitalism* is a sensitizing rather than defining term. While there are many iterations of capitalist economies in the world today, they all appear to share certain ineluctable elements, namely capital’s coercive direction of labor and theft of the value it produces.

If we look to the *New York Times*, the “newspaper of record,” capitalism is implicitly defined in opposition to socialism: private versus state ownership, control of the economy by a “market,” which is typically efficient and benevolent, as opposed to a government, with tendencies toward inefficiency and corruption. The *New York Times* avoids discussion of how businesses are or should be organized, whether autocratic, democratic, or theocratic, for example. Market efficiency, moreover, references a firm’s capacity to generate corporate profit; social consequences remain largely unspoken.

The predominant argument in favor of capitalist economies, whether academic or lay, is that they produce so much cool stuff. This is true, but avoids the fact that tens of billions of dollars are spent annually in convincing people that they want all of it. When demands cannot be generated to meet supplies, wars are waged on foreign countries to open new consumer markets. In addition, maintenance of a profit-oriented economy compels a competitive race for global resource extraction. Scientific consensus states that we are raping our mother Earth and she is growing less hospitable with each passing year. From the standpoint of those who suffer this collateral, capitalist economies appear not simply inefficient, but wholeheartedly misanthropic.

Economics are widely misunderstood in our society due to the enduring Newtonian ontological framework of the Western Enlightenment. Whereas Newtonian language draws us to see discrete objects, individuals, and *things*, capitalism is better understood through a language of processes and *relationships*. Instead of seeing the economy as a way of producing *commodities*, we should look at it as a mode of producing *types of human beings* and *qualities of associated life*. For example, money is often thought of as a material object, a piece of paper we carry with us in our pockets. Yet paper money exists in sufficient quantity to back up only an infinitesimal portion of daily global stock market transactions. Rather than a material object, it is useful to look at money as its carrier’s symbolic bond with society, a social relation of power that takes on material form only when two or more entities enact it. The rich man is more socially powerful than the poor man because he can, in exchange for money, get that poor man to do his bidding.

The trappings of Newtonian-Enlightenment ontology presented themselves starkly in the wake of our most recent economic calamity. Millions who have systematically lost their jobs, homes, and families, blame themselves and their personal lack of character, ability, or intelligence. Our culture pushes us to search for individual explanations for our common problems. A tremendous
conceptual challenge lies in recognizing first the larger patterns and structures with which our private lives are entangled, and second, the ways in which the habits of our daily lives contribute to our collective sufferings.

Philosophers have traditionally understood capitalism as a stage in the upward progress of humanity, liberation from the encrusted and oppressive lifeways of feudalism. During former times single religions and belief systems dominated entire populations. Political relations resembled those of the family; nobles lorded over their subjects as a father would his children. The modern concept of individuality thus remained a dream.

With the rise of market economies Voltaire observed folks from different countries who ascribed to varieties of religious beliefs meeting and interacting peacefully. Freedom of commerce seemed to engender freedom of belief. Although competition for wealth and worldly goods could be fierce, it appeared to be much more peaceful than the quest for ultimate salvation. Voltaire, one of the 20 wealthiest landlords in France, championed the spiritual and material uplift of traders and profiteers with little concern for the working man or woman. Nevertheless, he was not alone in identifying real progress.  

Capitalism’s poster child, Adam Smith, found early evidence suggesting that market economies might lead to universal material abundance. Efficiencies brought about through the new division of labor increased output manifold such that for the first time in historical memory it seemed that ordinary people could provide their families with basic minimums of food, shelter, and clothing. Although the colonial expansion of markets threatened to enslave smaller societies, Smith believed that wise governments could curtail such avarice by channeling it in socially responsible directions. In contrast to the patriarchy of feudal economies, a “cash nexus” mediated commercial societies. Contractual relations appeared to temper inequality and limit the capacity of one person to dominate another. Most importantly, Smith believed that markets could wed self-interest to cooperation. Success in trading issued from the satisfaction of others.

According to Georg Hegel, markets had profoundly educative effects; commerce brought cultures together and oriented individuals each others’ needs and concerns. Hegel concluded, as Smith did, that the new economy fostered a calculative attitude that weakened the hold of the family over its members. As individualism became possible in utterly new ways, the dialectical process of history could be seen freeing the human spirit. Among these novel virtues, however, critics began to spot cracks in the dam, in the form of psychic and cultural degradation. The rational being to whom capitalism had given birth was part human, part monster. Observing the frenetic bustling of the French marketplaces, Friedrich Engels described “a horde of ravenous beasts (for what else are
competitors?) who devour one another. Whereas Voltaire had described commercial societies weaned from the fanaticism of religious war, Engels and Marx saw men who had taken money as their new God and begun to slaughter in its name.

From a working-class perspective, Karl Marx’s Das Kapital (1867) offers a stunningly systematic and accurate description of capitalist political economy. Modern society, Marx observed, consists in two primary and antagonistic roles: capital and labor. The capitalist invests money, land, or machinery into the production process while the laborer exercises her labor power to create something of value, namely commodities. But the motivations and rationales behind the two roles differ in one all-important way. Capital’s prime motivation for entering into its relationship with labor is to turn a profit, to get more capital out of the labor process than was invested. And so, as a rule of logic, the capitalist must stand in the usurer’s relation to the laborer, paying her an amount lesser than the value of her work. This excess value produced by the laborer and accumulated by the capitalist is known as surplus value and is the primary source of capital growth. By contrast, the laborer enters the production relation out of necessity. Having been dispossessed of her means of subsistence—a historical process that I chronicle in Chapter Two—the laborer must sell the hours of her life and her capacity to work, the only commodities in her possession, to a boss in exchange for a wage. The will to live drives the laborer to work.

Capitalist industry, wrote Marx, functions primarily to generate profit for a capitalist. The satisfaction of human needs, therefore, can only ever be an incidental result of its production process. This is why our culture of material abundance operates according to a logic of scarcity and why farmers are paid to leave their fields fallow while neighbors starve. It is why the devastation of warfare is a “good” thing for those who produce weaponry and why big-box retailers cheer at the news of natural disaster. Because labor toils to generate profit for a boss rather than to satisfy human need, it has surrendered its intrinsic interest in the work. Labor has become alienated.

Considered in this sense we see that capitalism in no way limits itself to the West. There is a joke about the Chinese Premier riding in a limousine with the President of the United States. The limo comes to a fork in the road: to the left is socialism; to the right is capitalism. Stopping, the driver asks the leaders which way he should go. Immediately the President tells him to go right, toward capitalism. The Premier takes more time to look both ways and consider. Finally, he concurs, telling the driver to go right, but to put on the left blinker. Recently, Slavoj Zizek has described the Chinese political economy as “capitalism with Asian values.” Here and elsewhere, mixed with varying degrees of nationalism, authoritarianism, and parliamentarism, the most basic relations of capital maintain: labor toils to have the lion’s share of its fruits stolen and hoarded by capital.
Although the calculative mentality engendered by market societies appears to weaken the hold of traditional institutions over their members, critics charge that it threatens to subordinate all other attitudes and modes of thought. Max Weber, Werner Sombart, and Georg Lukacs all cautioned that technical thinking, narrow focus upon means, obstructs the ends to which those means contribute. Calculative rationality, warned Martin Heidegger, might ultimately eradicate the “meditative thought” that is the very essence of our humanity, those refined thoughts, perceptions, and emotions that arise only through contemplation and reflection. Capitalists and their front line agents, Marx suggests, fall most completely under this spell. These individuals, he tells us, must not possess violent and avaricious personalities. No differently than the subjects of Zimbardo’s Prison Experiment, it is the impersonal role of capitalists and their agents, and the requirements of those roles according the constitutive rules of our political economy, that select for and compel violence and avarice. Take, for example, the case of the Ford Pinto.

1970’s-model Ford Pintos featured gas tanks situated so as to rupture and explode upon low-speed rear impact. The Ford Motor Company knew about this problem and had its engineers design an $11 safety valve to solve it. Before proceeding to manufacture the part, the company put together a cost-benefit analysis which compared the cost of recalling and installing the safety device on 12.5 million vehicles against that of paying out court settlements to an estimated 360 people who would be injured and killed by the vehicle each year without the device. The former figure came to $137.5 million while the latter totaled only $49.5 million. Ford had to choose between saving lives and saving money. Following the logical imperatives of the game, the company decided not to install the safety feature. Between 1971 and 1977 at least 500 people burned to death unnecessarily inside a Ford Pinto.

It is easy to condemn the Ford executives in this case. Although it saved the company millions, their decision resulted in foreseen, and preventable, death and suffering. Yet, according to the modern paradigm of the rational human person, the market-maximizing homo economicus, these executives made the correct decision. In putting a price on life, they did nothing more nor less than comply with the predominant ethos and morality of our culture. Krysti Guest describes the phenomenon as a “perverse incentive”:

The fact that women corporate lawyers get paid about eight times the amount that rape crisis workers do is not because corporate law is naturally more valuable than rape crisis work. The difference is generated from the fact that our ‘free market’ economy values big business significantly more than it does stopping violence against women.

The combination of capital’s profit motive with labor’s essential alienation, i.e., lack of all motivation but to earn a wage, means that the capitalist must become a coercive master in order to squeeze as much surplus value as possible out of her laborers. Competition is fierce among capitalists
themselves. In order to stay in the game and avoid being eaten by a hungrier fish, each must exert daily violence against labor. Spoken in more colorful words, the constitutive rules, roles, and structures of our political economy feature a class of masters—fighting a war of all against all amongst themselves—pitted against a class of slaves. As of the 2012 New Year, polls show that a two-thirds majority of Americans recognize this class conflict and see it as more intense than racial conflict between blacks and whites.46

Both the historian, Eric Williams, in Capitalism and Slavery (1944), and W.E.B. Du Bois, in Black Reconstruction in America (1935), argued that slavery in Saint-Domingue, as well as in the antebellum American South, represented quintessentially modern modes of production, constituted by the basic, antagonistic relation between labor and capital.47 Du Bois wrote that “Negro slaves in America represented the worst and lowest conditions among modern laborers.”48 Although they differed in significant ways, the lives of textile workers in antebellum Lowell, Massachusetts bore striking resemblance to the lives of cotton-pickers in Lexington, Kentucky. Both labored for a master under the coercive threat of death. Whereas the Southerner trembled before the noose, the Northerner dreaded plates empty of food.

From the Colonial through the Progressive Era of American history, folks from across the political and ideological spectra condemned wage labor as a degradation of life. Many insisted that the development of modern capitalism had reduced the worker to a state of enslavement. Still today, members of the working class understand themselves as wage slaves.49

Resistance and Surrender

“But what more oft, in nations grown corrupt, 
And by their vices brought to servitude, 
Than to love bondage more than liberty— 
Bondage with ease than strenuous liberty.”


“If labor produces all the wealth of a country, why should it not claim ownership?...We claim, that although the masses have advanced towards independence, they will never be completely free from vassalage until they have thrown off the system of working for hire. Men working for wages are, in a greater or less degree, in the bonds of servdom. The demand and supply of labor makes them the football of circumstances.”

The Knights of Saint Crispin (Shoemaker’s Union), 187051

“The process of industrial education...does not, however, consist primarily in going to school. It consists primarily in active effort on behalf of an increasing measure of self-government...The class
struggle must be fertilized by an increasingly general understanding of the practical economic and moral value of democratizing industry, and of enabling the workers…to organize their work and determine its conditions and costs…The wisest of modern educators has declared that ‘the only way to prepare for social life is to engage in social life.’ The rule applies to society conceived as a school no less than to the school conceived as a society. Men and women will become better citizens by participating in those political and social activities which liberate and intensify the human will.”

Herbert Croly, Progressive Democracy, 1915

19th-century America endured a drawn-out battle between the liberal ideal of material abundance and the republican virtues of independence and self-government. Champions of industrial progress promised that a widespread and growing commodity culture would eventually level class distinctions and forever eliminate the holocaust of industrial war. Defenders of republican tradition cautioned that this progress would crush all prospects for popular democracy. Submission to wagedom, they warned, would rob the citizenry of its capacity for self-government. As industry grew throughout the century and into the next, the demos proved itself unequal to the challenge of mastering its fate; meanwhile the wage relation entrenched itself as a seemingly-permanent fixture of modern life.

Thomas Paine, one of America’s fiercest colonial populists, clung to traditional Roman and Christian ethics of temperance in resisting the liberal promise of salvation through material progress. Accompanying the economic development of his time, Paine saw “shocking extremes” of affluence and misery. He decried the capitalist dispossession of the nation’s land and resources that had created “a species of poverty and wretchedness that did not exist before.” Growing wealth and splendor seemed to be borne upon poverty and theft and to have reduced a growing segment of the population to a permanent state of wagedom. Furthermore, it seemed to Paine that wage-work disabused laborers of their capacity for active political participation, which he took as the primary virtue of the good democratic citizen.

Following Paine, Orestes Brownson named the separation of capital and labor as the “mother evil” of modern society. Lacking the opportunity to practice self-management in industry, Brownson argued, citizens would be divested of their capacity to govern themselves in the political sphere. Liberal proponents of material progress—the ethos to which the wage system had become attached—committed the folly of overlooking the educational and citizen-forming aspects of society’s economic institutions.

Independent farmers and shopkeepers who controlled the conditions and rhythms of daily working life composed the majority of the mid-19th century non-slave male workforce. Self-management in industry was understood to instill the character and discipline necessary for wise and responsible civic participation. By contrast, the regimentation of the modern factory threatened to
turn workers into dull beasts of burden. Wage labor entailed blind submission to a boss’s directives, a daily mis-education that unfit men and women for the work of democracy.

During the decades prior to the Progressive Era, Americans attempted to hang on to the deeply-seated republican ideals of independence and self-government which wagedom threatened to vanquish. Liberals, conservatives, Democrats, and Republicans alike, condemned wagedom as fundamentally incompatible with democratic life. However, two major forces would align to defeat this consensus. In the first case, industrial progress brought gains in the enjoyment of leisure and comfort which seemed to outweigh the losses of independence and self-government. That is, increasing material abundance anesthetized Americans to their alienation at work while distracting them as to their disconnection from civic life. In the second case, the American public seemed to prove itself incompetent to the challenges of modern democratic life. Classical political theory had tasked the demos with the responsibility of deliberation over matters of public import and rational selection of leaders who would deliver their decisions to government. However, by the turn of the 20th century, Freud had begun to teach the world that human beings are driven not by evidence and reason, but rather by emotions, desires, and animal instincts. The citizenry proved itself fearful and easily hoodwinked, eager followers of demagogues and churlish consumers of political burlesque.

Following World War I, Prohibition swept the country; the Sedition Act of 1918 trampled the First Amendment, and Ku Klux Klan membership swelled. Resurgences of nativism, fundamentalism, and jingoism convinced liberal intellectuals that intelligent and thinking people were in the minority. Modern life exposed public opinion, the theoretical basis for participatory democracy, as incompetent. Mass public education, as Lippmann and others saw it, offered no remedy for “the bewildered herd.” Society would thus have to be governed by experts; politics would entail the selection of leaders among party elites who competed with each other to manipulate voters into endorsing programs designed and packaged behind closed doors.

In contrast to liberal theories of democracy that cast citizens as passive, albeit rational choosers, Rousseau and Mill envisioned an active, participatory citizenry. Rousseau believed that political participation, particularly at the local level, affected people psychologically. Public discussion and debate forced individuals to account for interests wider than their own. Through cooperative decision-making folks became aware of the intimate link between private and public concerns. Following Rousseau, Mill set the criterion of judgment for political institutions as “the degree in which they promote the general mental advancement of the community.” Whereas private, money-getting ventures exercised few of a person’s virtues and fostered a cowardly public indifference, local political participation conferred an “active” and public-spirited character.
Carrying this participatory-democratic theory into the 20th century, G.D.H. Cole insisted that industry had become modern society’s chief educational institution. Its goal, he wrote, must “not [be] material efficiency, but also essentially the fullest self-expression of all the members.”\(^{59}\) Yet most daily occupations “trained [the multitudes] to subservience.”\(^{60}\) Lacking the opportunity for their exercise on the job, wageworkers failed to develop the habits, mentalities, and civic culture necessary for imposing democracy onto the larger political sphere.

Writing in *Progressive Democracy* (1915), Herbert Croly addressed “the educational organization of democracy in its economic aspect” and envisioned corporate enterprise as society’s chief popular democratic political experience.\(^{61}\) Croly described the wageworker as suffering from a condition of enforced servitude from which she could not escape:

> The truth is that the wage-system in its existing form creates a class of essential economic dependents…Their economic situation is determined in part by forces over which they as individuals can exercise but little control…Their employer is literally their master…The number of people who graduate from the wage-earning class…is small compared to the total number of wage-earners…By the very necessities of the case the vast majority of wage-earners are condemned to a Hobson’s choice among masters.\(^{62}\)

For Croly, “the most important single task of modern democratic social organization” was to win for the worker the opportunity to have a say over the nature and circumstances of her employment. John Dewey shared this sentiment, asking, “What does democracy mean save that the individual is to have a share in determining the conditions and the aims of his own work?”\(^{63}\) In the old republican tradition, these men believed that the habits of self-management necessary for democracy had to be practiced in daily life, particularly in the economic sphere. However, for the remainder of the 20th century, the American labor movement conceded the status of wagedom and abandoned the quest for the democratization of industry. Union bosses, pimps in the prostitution of labor and negotiators for the loot of empire, arrived at agreements with representatives of big business to focus narrowly upon the level of wages paid to workers and not to discuss who shall manage the techniques, conditions, and purposes of production.

**Conclusion**

> “I freed thousands of slaves; I could have freed thousands more if they had known they were slaves.”
> 
> *Harriet Tubman, circa 1900*\(^{64}\)

As Herbert Blumer would remind us, “slavery” is a sensitizing rather than defining concept.\(^{65}\) One cannot pin it down *a-priori* to a particular description or form. The world has seen many iterations of slavery throughout the course of its hoary centuries: from the ancient Greeks, Aztecs, and Egyptians,
to the modern-day flesh slaves of Southeast Asia. Slavery is impossible to separate from poverty. Overwhelmingly, poverty is the principal factor driving human beings into slavery today. Lacking alternative means of survival, men and women, boys and girls, are compelled to sell themselves into the commodity market, to pledge their lives to a master in order to live. Understood through this lens, the phrases “humanitarian capitalism” and “democratic capitalism” which we hear uttered from time to time are contradictions in terms.

Citizens of the first American Republic saw wage work as a temporary stepping-stone on the path to independent proprietorship. Yet by the early-1900’s it had become clear that very few individuals ever graduated to the owning class. Nevertheless, Horatio Alger’s rags-to-riches novels became simulacra of the American Dream. Meanwhile the ideology of Social Darwinism claimed dominion over both popular and academic intellectual culture, convincing Americans against all evidence that the meritorious would some day become wealthy enough to escape the dregs of wage-enslavement. From the Progressive Era on, American intellectuals abandoned hopes for a self-governing citizenry in their pursuit of the consolation prize of material abundance. Accordingly, American culture aligned prospects for social progress with growth in GDP and confused the act of conspicuous consumption for participation in democratic society.

If the education of democratic citizens is indeed what we seek, we will have to both liberate ourselves from wagedom and learn to manage industry. We cannot learn independence and self-government when daily we are ruled by the autocracy and despotism of our jobs. According to Georg Hegel, the slave who recognizes her condition as a slave is faced with a choice: either the tolerance of slavery or the acceptance of the possibility of death in the struggle for freedom. We inherit from our ancestors a tremendous material and intellectual wealth. That wealth exists to pay for democracy. May we have the bravery to claim what is ours and the ingenuity to realize its potential.

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10 Napoleon called the island by its Arawak name, Haiti, while unsuccessfully attempting its re-colonization in 1803.


12 Buck-Morss, 821.

13 Ibid., 847.

14 Ibid., 848.

15 Frederick Douglass, “The Last Flogging,” in *The Narrative and Selected Writings*, 139-151.

16 See endnote 4 of the dissertation’s Introduction.

17 Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, 163.


21 Ibid., 474.

22 Ibid., 478.

23 Taussig, 20.


27 On the scientific model, definitions posit generalized laws for which every observed instance can be seen as a case. Social concepts fit this model poorly due to the infinite variety of distinctive forms that the human world can take. Rather, social concepts serve us by offering a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances; they provide clues and suggestions for understanding distinctive expressions. See Herbert Blumer, “What Is Wrong With Social Theory?” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 18 (1954), 3-10.

28 The National Science Foundation has released numerous reports regarding the facts and predicted effects of climate change. For example, see “Climate Change Inevitable in the 21st Century,” National Science Foundation, Press Release 05-043 (March 17, 2005),


“Adam Smith: Moral Philosophy and Political Economy,” in Muller, 51-83.

“Hegel: A Life Worth Choosing,” in ibid., 139-165.


The characteristic relations of capital were evidenced even in the former Soviet Union, where the majority worked under the direction and for the enrichment of the Soviet State. Landless proletarians labored at gunpoint inside Petrograd factories in order to further the designs and provide for the luxuries of inner-party members. Russian Revolution in Color (Sanachie, 2007).

Muller, 240-241, 257, 263-271.


In their objective relation to labor, bosses and managers who wield hiring and firing power are agents of capital, regardless of whether their salary is large or small.


The Ford Pinto case is hardly unique. More recently, the pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline exhibited the very same rationality in regard to its anti-diabetic drug, Avandia. According to Dr. Steven Nissen of the Cleveland Clinic, trials run by the company showed that the drug significantly increased the likelihood of heart attack and death in diabetes patients. GlaxoSmithKline then performed a cost-benefit analysis of whether or not to release this research to the medical profession and the public. Since the price of releasing this life-saving information outweighed the cost of court settlements paid to victims and victims’ families, the company decided to conceal their studies. The Food and Drug Administration’s Office of Surveillance and Epidemiology estimates that between 50 and 200 thousand diabetic patients will die unnecessarily as a result. See “Medical Whistleblower Dr. Steven Nissen on ‘Escape Fire: The Fight to


48 Du Bois, Black Reconstruction in America, 9.

49 The term “wage slavery” will not appeal to everyone. Not all who sell their labor will find it an apt description of their work. It is important to recognize the aesthetic and emotional contents of this term in addition to its rational components. Folks with jobs that pay middle-class salaries will be less apt to experience the wage relation as a form of enslavement. In terms of prestige and material comfort, the work of the middle class is rewarded above and beyond the typical laborer who composes roughly 60 percent of the job force. These relative benefits may lessen perceived incidence and intensity of coercion, even going so far as to mollify the inherently antagonistic relation of bosses to their employees. Again, the terror of this relationship, and the horror of the wage condition in general, express themselves most intensely in the dregs of the economy, where approximately 60 percent of the country’s workers find themselves mired. Such jobs tend to pay poverty or just-barely-above poverty wages and most importantly offer little opportunity for self-direction. For a deeply engaging, as well as inspiring, aesthetic account of this experience see Liberte Locke, “My Body, My Rules: A Case for Rape and Domestic Violence Survivors Becoming Workplace Organizers,” Industrial Worker, Vol. 109, No. 3 (April, 2012), 6.


60 Pateman, 36-39.

61 Croly, Progressive Democracy, 379.

62 Ibid., 382-3. Here Croly is saying that the average person has many options from which to choose, nearly all of which are awful. By choosing not to work, the person condemns herself to destitution. The other
choices are between a series of jobs in which she will toil for a poor wage at the bottom of a corporate hierarchy, exercising little if any control over the conditions and purposes of her work. It is important to stress the class bias inherent to attitudes regarding choice in the economic sphere of life. Members of the middle and upper classes tend to put more faith in choices because theirs are more plentiful, diverse, and carry greater rewards. The relative autonomy enjoyed by academics—although many complain that this is being eroded—removes us psychologically from the experience, as described by Lukacs, of figuring into a job as a mechanical part of a pre-ordered regime, in which one’s own will influences nothing. The bourgeois middle-class are not capitalists, per se, although their ideology and lifeways are instrumental in reproducing the class-stratified capitalist society. See Muller, 270-271.


65 Blumer.

66 See Ishrat Shamim, State of Trafficking in Women and Children and their Sexual Exploitation in Bangladesh (Dhaka, Mother Printers, 2010).


68 This was Lippmann’s sentiment in Drift and Mastery, 76.

69 Throughout the dissertation I employ terms such as “we,” “us,” or “the enemy” that can be understood as “speech acts,” described by the philosopher of language, J.L. Austin. Although their referents do not quite exist as self-conscious entities, the idea is to speak of them as roles or characters in a game, with the intent of bringing the game into being. See J.L. Austin, How to Do Things With Words (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005 (1962)).
CHAPTER TWO:

THE BONDS OF SERFDOM

Introduction

“What is to prevent the reproduction here, in our land of boasted equality, of the order of things which now exists in the old world? As yet, that order does not exist here in all its revolting details; but who can fail to see that there is a strong tendency to it? Our economical systems are virtually those of England…and what is to prevent the reproduction of the same state of things in relation to our laboring population with that which gangrenes English Society?…what mean all our boasts of equality, all our Fourth of July oratory, all our patriotic songs and national glorifications? What else is it that we are constantly throwing in the face of the old world?”

Orestes Brownson, “The Laboring Classes,” 1840

The modern relation between capital and labor mirrors in essential aspects the violence and cruelty exacted by master upon slave. It is through a historical record of theft and terror that these roles have developed in the modern world. The establishment of our contemporary political economy required capital to first dispossess labor of its traditional means of subsistence: its land as well as craft and artisanal skills. Only after having these basic means of survival expropriated did labor submit to the wage relation.

Following this process, a weak demos allowed an oligarchy to re-establish in the New World the old State ideal which the Declaration of Independence had threatened to smash. This new State, from which the masses seek security and to which they devote their lives, remains the private possession of a polyarchy employing government as its executive arm. As experienced by the working class, the United States resembles an old feudal caste society in its most gruesome details. This situation maintains not primarily due to the vitality of our plutocracy, but rather to the decrepitude of our democracy.

“The Conquest of Bread”

“The comfort of the rich depends upon an abundant supply of the poor.”
“It is the impossibility of living by any other means that compels our farm labourers to till the soil whose fruits they will not eat, and our masons to construct buildings in which they will not live. It is want that drags them to those markets where they await masters who will do them the kindness of buying them. It is want that compels them to go down on their knees to the rich man in order to get from him permission to enrich him...He is free, you say. Ah!...What does it mean? They have no master—they have one, and the most terrible, the most imperious of masters, that is, need. It is this that reduces them to the most cruel dependence...They become the valets of anyone who has money...They live only by hiring out their arms. They must therefore find someone to hire them, or die of hunger. Is that to be free? The ‘independence’ [of the wage-worker] is one of the most baneful scourges that the refinement of modern times has produced. It augments the wealth of the rich and the poverty of the poor.”

Simon Linguet, *Theorie des lois civiles*, 1767

March 25, 1911

At the corner of Washington Place and Green Street in New York City passersby hear an explosion echo from inside the Asch building, home of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. One onlooker describes suddenly seeing a “bale of dark dress goods” come tumbling out of a smoke-filled eighth-story window; and then another, followed by many more. These are not garments being thrown out, but women leaping to their sure deaths in order to escape the smoke and flames. The fire engulfs the building so quickly that some workers are later found melted to their workbenches. 145 women and girls die in total. The police carrying away the bodies had beaten and bludgeoned the same women two weeks prior as they struck for better working conditions. Inspectors find the stairway doors locked. The building had no sprinklers and no fire drill had ever been conducted. The local judge later rules the company owners “not guilty” on all charges. “Capital can commit no crime,” writes one news reporter, “when it is in pursuit of profits.”

April 15, 1974

Newspaper photographs show Patty Hearst, kidnapped daughter of printing magnate, William Randolph Hearst, strapped with an M1 carbine assault rifle, robbing the Hibernia Bank at 1450 Noriega Street in San Francisco. Roughly two weeks ago, Hearst released an audiotape stating that she had joined the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) and taken the name Tanya. The SLA took Hearst forcibly from her apartment in Berkeley on February 3rd. The 19-year-old is believed to be suffering Stockholm Syndrome.

The “brainwashing” of Patty Hearst began when her captors ripped her from her home, locked her in the trunk of a car, and brought her to their turf. For the first several days she remained in a small, dark, womb-like closet, deprived of her senses and daily rhythms. “Reborn” into the world of her captors, Hearst found herself entirely at their mercy. The SLA decided when she would eat, sleep, and defecate—complete and utter control of her physical body. Under the captivity of the SLA, Hearst was as helpless as an infant. Similar to an infant, she began to act and behave in ways distinctive of total dependency. At first feigning sympathy and approval for her captors in order to survive, she
eventually came to identify with them and went so far as to take up arms and risk her life for their cause.

Writing in *Social Problems (1883)*, Henry George borrowed Hegel’s nifty allegory of Robinson Crusoe and his slave, Friday. What would be different, George asked, if Crusoe had welcomed Friday to the island with a Declaration of Independence and a Bill of Rights, yet also insisted that the island was his exclusive private property? Aside from sailing or flying away, how is Friday to live except sell himself to Crusoe as a slave? The ownership of a person’s land, constituting his basic source of sustenance, is tantamount to ownership of the person himself.

Although today the existence of wage labor seems to us natural and unassailable, its introduction required theft and violence. As I have documented in the previous chapter, peasants and freeholders from around the world, including the United States, have fought ferociously against it. Historically, the reduction of free people to a state of wagedom has been accomplished either through the dispossession of their lands and craft skills or by total authoritarian claim over their physical bodies. In England, the Netherlands, and France, from the 16th century onward, we find a long history of class warfare throughout which kings, barons, and capitalists expropriated peasants’ lands and artisans’ shops, their essential means of subsistence, in order to render them dependent upon a wage.

Throughout the centuries, merchants accumulated large sums of money, instituted systems of banking and credit, and used their fortunes to purchase quantities of machinery with which to centralize production under the roof of the modern factory. Unable to compete with the bottom line of these large-scale operations, peasants and independent craftspeople were forced out of the “free marketplace.” A “landed monopoly,” wrote Thomas Paine, has “dispossessed more than half the inhabitants of every nation of their natural inheritance.” In order to survive, these men and women have been compelled to seek work with those same corporations that first starved and impoverished them.

During the 19th century, immigrants arrived on America’s eastern shores starved and without a dollar in their pockets. Facing harsh discrimination, Irish Catholics struggled to find work and frequently took the worst jobs by necessity rather than choice. Coal bosses sought out the Irish particularly, knowing that they could be gotten to perform the harshest and most grueling work, often 12-14 hours a day, for little pay, which frequently came in the form of “scrip” usable only at company-owned stores. These Irish miners lived in company-owned homes at extortion-level prices. Having the costs of food, clothing, and mining equipment taken directly from their wages, they often finished weeks with little pay, no pay, or even indebted to the company. Resident historians describe them as “indentured slaves.”
With miners in cheap and ready supply, coal companies felt little compulsion to institute modern health and safety standards. Deaths in the mines occurred regularly due to collapses and gas poisonings. Historians recount dead miners’ remains being collected in buckets and placed on family doorsteps with a note attached, informing them that they had one week to find a replacement before being kicked out of town.10

The Irish who organized themselves in attempts to challenge their conditions came up against armed Pinkerton detectives and local judges bought off by the companies. Many an organizer met death hanging from the end of the executioner’s noose. These immigrants experienced wage slavery in the mining towns not simply as a decline in their standard of living, but as a radical infringement upon their status as free men and women. Slavery was a literal and not merely metaphorical description of life. The companies seemed to demand that the workers submit their very souls. By the 1890’s the United Mine Workers and Western Federation of Miners had joined the ranks of militant unions around the country. Fighting for much more than higher wages, these unions sought to restore to workers, plagued more by slavery than poverty, freedom and control over their daily lives.

Many of us living today are the descendants not only of these Irish miners, but also of the millions of immigrants who built this country as wage and chattel slaves. Under what logic or rationale can the world now belong as private property to so few?11 For hundreds of years our grandfathers and great-grandmothers have toiled to clear the forests, drain the swamps, and build highways of land and water. Every acre bears the stains of their sweat and blood. Every invention and instrument of technology shows the mark of their genius. Their machines, buildings, and works of art constitute our living legacy. Yet most of us enter this world poor as paupers. Our heritage has been seized and now rests privately under the protection of “law and order.” “By what right,” Kropotkin asked, “can any one person or corporation appropriate the least morsel of this immense whole and say, ‘this is mine, not yours?’”12

Not only are the children of the working class cut off from the rightful possession of their collective inheritance; they also enter the world with no field to plant, no shop to tend, and no forest to cut without first agreeing to submit the greater portion of their labor’s fruits to a capitalist. Worse, many of us will be compelled by circumstance to become the police officers and judges armed with pistols and prisons to enforce the “rights” by which this tragic affair maintains.13

Returning to Hegel’s allegory of Crusoe and his slave, Friday, we see that the master-slave relationship obtains both in the case of the master claiming ownership over the slave’s body and in his taking possession of the slave’s land and means of subsistence. In either situation one class of persons is able to appropriate the labor of another. Henry George argued in a chapter of Social Problems,
titled “Slavery and Slavery,” that chattel slavery, predominant in the American South prior to the Civil War, only tends to grow up where population density is sparse and hence labor in high demand. This was why slave ships sailed from Africa to America during the early-19th century rather than to England or Ireland, where the man-to-land ratio was high and labor in cheap and ready supply.\(^{14}\)

George contemplated that had chattel slavery been legal in Massachusetts during the 1850’s, it would be hard, for purely economic reasons, to imagine any factory owner agreeing to it. Why own chattel slaves when wage slaves could be rented so much more cheaply? On the Southern plantations, slave children represented an economic strain at least until puberty while women devoted much of their labor power to caring for those children. Elderly slaves were much less productive than their younger counterparts. By comparison, wage slaves working in Northern factories were virtually always highly productive. Company bosses fired the elderly to replace them with younger workers. Children were sent to school to keep them out of the labor market, a practice supported by both labor and capital, although for different reasons. In this way, the Northern production system effectively cut out much of the overhead that burdened the Southern economy. From the perspective of \textit{homo economicus}, wage labor made more dollars and sense.\(^{15}\)

In George’s final estimation, there was one profound evil present in the wage system that the chattel system lacked. Northern abolitionists found a clear and certain target for their censure; the slave-owner seemed to stand as the sole and unquestionable source of slavery’s wickedness. But in the North, amongst widespread depredation and cruelty, the abolitionist could target no certain enemy. No single person seemed responsible for pervasive industrial terror. This impersonal factor, wrote George,

permits cruelties that would not be tolerated under the one system to pass almost unnoticed under the other. Human beings are overworked, are starved, are robbed of all the light and sweetness of life, are condemned to ignorance and brutishness, and to the infection of physical and moral disease; are driven to crime and suicide, not by other individuals, but by iron necessities for which it seems that no one in particular is responsible.\(^{16}\)

Northern abolitionists claimed moral superiority over the slave-owning South and today we continue to teach this as fact in our history books. Such may indeed be the case. However, consider the “morality” of Northern industry exhibited by the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. Or ponder that tens of thousands will die this year in automobile accidents driving to unnecessary jobs that serve the primary purpose of enriching some employer. Tens of thousands more will be killed or maimed on the job. “Work,” writes Bob Black,

institutionalizes homicide as a way of life…We kill people in the six-figure range (at least) in order to sell Big Macs and Cadillacs…Our forty or fifty thousand annual highway fatalities are victims, not martyrs. They died for nothing—or rather, they died for work. But work is nothing to die for.\(^{17}\)
Morality aside, chattel slavery made poor economic sense to Northern business and this fact made anodyne Northern condemnation of chattel slavery.

Evolutionary Biology teaches that human beings share a primordial neurological circuit, dating back perhaps a billion years, with all complex life forms on the planet. This Bio-Survival circuit hard-wires organisms to latch onto a nourishing mother-figure at birth. In addition to providing sustenance, this mother-figure serves as a fight-or-flight safe-point. During the course of his mid-20th-century experiments, the ethologist, Konrad Lorenz, discovered that infants can imprint almost anything as a mother-figure. Giraffes, for example, have latched onto jeeps, goslings onto ping-pong balls. As the creature develops, explains Robert Anton Wilson, the pack, herd, or tribe may become the Bio-Survival safe-point.18

Throughout most of human history the threat of exile excited terror in tribal members sufficient to enforce cultural conformity. “Banished!” cried Shakespeare’s Romeo, “the damned use that word in hell.” But over the past centuries, the old tribal bond has been broken.19 By expropriating humanity’s means of subsistence, corporations and the modern State have established themselves as our species’ principal unit of bio-survival. Southern plantation owners similarly became the givers and takers of life after ripping Africans apart from their native land. Not all slaves, however, learned to love their new mothers.

The life story of Malcolm X reads a Promethean theme similar to that of Frederick Douglass. Having learned to lose his fear and stand up to a master very different, but equally cruel, Malcolm X believed it vital to mind the distinction between house Negroes and field Negroes during the days of chattel slavery.

You have to read the history of slavery to understand there were two kinds of Negroes. There was that old house Negro and the field Negro. And the house Negro always looked out for his master. When the field Negroes got too much out of line, he held them back in check. He put ‘em back on the plantation. The house Negro could afford to do that cause he lived better than the field Negro. He ate better, he dressed better, and he lived in a better house; he lived right up next to his master, in the attic, or the basement. He ate the same food his master ate and wore his same clothes. And he could talk just like his master—good diction. And he loved his master more than his master loved himself. That’s why he didn’t want his master hurt. If the master got sick he’d say, ‘what’s the matter boss, we sick?’ He was as sick as the master was. But then you had some field Negroes, who lived in huts, had nothin’ to lose. They wore the worst kinds of clothes. They ate the worst food. And they caught hell; they felt the sting of the lash. They hated their master. Oh yes they did. If the master got sick they prayed that the master died. This was the difference between the two. And today you still have house Negroes and field Negroes. I’m a field Negro.20

In Malcolm X’s analysis, the house Negro identified with his captor in the same way and for the same reasons that Patty Hearst identified with the SLA. Today most of us remain, to greater and lesser extents, in the grips of a mass epidemic of Stockholm Syndrome. American culture, over the past
century, has learned to accept the rules and roles of capitalist political economy as indomitable facts of life. Like the house Negro, we have come to identify our own personal interests with those of a system whose only use for us is as slaves.21

The American Declaration of Independence threatened to liberate humanity by crushing the power and legitimacy of a ruling State. This threat ultimately failed as our ancestors allowed a ruling class to re-establish the State in modern form. What had once incorporated itself into monarchs and the mythology of Divine Right became hallowed by the language of “representative democracy.” Synonymous with neither nation nor country, the State is the private possession of the “significant classes” who wield government as their executive arm. Symbolized in Uncle Sam and the flag, the State calls upon the herd instinct of the demos to draw all into its loyal service.

The State

“Nothing but a permanent body can check the imprudence of democracy.”

*Alexander Hamilton, Constitutional Convention, 1787*22

“Once the State has begun to function, and a large class finds its interest and its expression of power in maintaining the State, this ruling class may compel obedience from any uninterested minority. The State thus becomes an instrument by which the power of the whole herd is wielded for the benefit of a class. The rulers soon learn to capitalize the reverence which the State produces in the majority, and turn it into a general resistance toward a lessening of their privileges. The sanctity of the State becomes identified with the sanctity of the ruling class, and the latter are permitted to remain in power under the impression that in obeying and serving them, we are obeying and serving society, the nation, the great collectivity of all of us.”

*Randolph Bourne, “The State,” 1918*23

Once upon a time, Europeans lived under the military dictatorships of competing warlords. In the quest to establish order amidst an erstwhile disordered world, those warlords became kings around whom developed a mythical rationale for the maintenance of feudalism. Through the cosmology of the *Great Chain of Being* and the holy notion of *Divine Right*, kings, queens, clergy, and nobility ruled over the hearts and minds of their subjects. This self-replicating, hierarchical society that compelled hereditary loyalty from the masses is the *State* in its original form. The State, wrote Randolph Bourne, imposes itself as a father figure from which all subjects seek comfort and safety and to which, during both war and peace, they sacrifice their lives. Although the State lives by the sweat and blood of the herd-like working class, it remains for all practical purposes the private possession of a ruling elite.24
As early as the 16th century, Machiavelli suspected that traditional forms of elite rule—monarchies and nobilities—were becoming vulnerable to demotic energies swelling up from the masses, those excluded from literacy, safety, wealth, sustenance, and protection of law. A powerful State, he believed, required a broad base of popular support by which to maintain and increase itself. Although this citizenry would not share in the exercise of power, it would be taught, through religion and popular ideology, to sanctify the State by pledging its life and loyalty.25

In America, the Revolution and Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence threatened to blast the old notion of the State by asserting that a government could rule only by the consent of its subjects. If at any time that government failed to protect and represent its citizens’ interests, those citizens reserved the right to revolt. However, as Lippmann reminds us, the Founding Fathers were a very conscious upper class determined to maintain their privilege.26 According to Jackson Main, only about three percent of the Revolutionary population owned enough property to be considered wealthy. This small economic elite exerted undue influence over schools, newspapers, and churches. In the state of Maryland, for example, property and wealth criteria barred over 90 percent of the population from holding public office. The propertyless of Boston could neither vote nor attend town hall meetings.27

During the decades leading up to the Revolution, a demos began to arise amongst folks living outside the colonial power structure. Artisans, small farmers, women, and Native Americans fought against imperial taxes, ordinances, and land seizures. Foreign observers marveled at America’s “fugitive democracy” of demonstrations, petitions, destruction of official residences, and storming of jails.28 While the Revolution embodied this demotic spirit in its bid to emancipate a people from the rule of monarchy, at the center of the contest battled two factions of an upper class: those who cast their lot with the crown and those who stood to increase their power by its defeat.29

While Patrick Henry was stirring anger and dissention against the British, the working poor of Philadelphia and elsewhere were organizing to challenge the power and wealth they saw hoarded by the American colonial aristocracy. To whom that aristocracy pledged loyalty, whether England or the United States, mattered little. Only a minority stood to gain much from a successful revolution. Thus the challenge of the Founders was twofold: first, to incite resentment amongst the working class, and second, to make sure that anger was directed toward King George rather than the American elite.30 Once war had been officially declared, the poor were immediately seized upon and ordered to join the military. Others enlisted freely with aspirations to rise in rank and social status. Most wealthy men avoided service by paying for a substitute. As in every war, large producers and manufacturers grew exceedingly rich. Sometimes their profiteering caught the attention of soldiers who responded in mutiny.31
In the Revolution’s aftermath, New England’s financial elites began dispossessing Massachusetts veterans and small farmers of their homes and land in order to repay war debts to Europe. Many of the veterans, never having received pay for their service, were sent to debtor’s prisons. Shays’ Rebellion of 1786-1787 saw these commoners join with local militias to take up arms against their thieving oppressors. In response George Washington called for a stronger, centralized national authority that could effectively suppress this brand of lower-class dissent. Believing that the Articles of Confederation (1781) left too much power in the hands of the demos, colonial America’s ambitious financial elite organized a Constitutional coups d’etat to re-establish the State ideal. In 1787 the leaders of the propertied and ruling class convened a secret, counterrevolutionary Convention in Philadelphia to create a mechanism for restoring the sanctity of property and debt.32

Published in 1913, Charles Beard’s Economic Interpretation of the Constitution argued that the authors and signers of the U.S. Constitution aimed to establish in their new nation a legal framework with the principal aim of securing property rights for wealthy land owners such as themselves. If the rich could not control government directly, Beard wrote, they would be sure to control the laws by which it operated. A strong centralized government, as opposed to a looser federation of states, could benefit capitalists with protective tariffs, moneylenders with favorable policies, and slaveholders with safeguards against revolts. Most importantly, perhaps, the Constitution gave bondholders an institution that could effectively levy taxes to guarantee repayment.33

John Adams and Alexander Hamilton fervently expressed fears that robust popular democracy, or “the mob,” as Adams put it, would lead the nation into chaos. James Madison famously wrote in the Federalist Papers of the need to protect America’s “opulent minority” against a tyrannous majority.34 “No working man or ordinary farmer or shopkeeper,” writes Sheldon Wolin, “helped to write the Constitution. The American political system was not born a democracy, but born with a bias against democracy. It was constructed by those who were either skeptical about democracy or hostile to it.”35 Even the freedoms later guaranteed by the Bill of Rights came under immediate siege in 1798 with passage of the Sedition Act. Today the 1st, 4th, and 6th Amendments are effectively dead letters.36

The original Constitution protected elite rule from the penetration of popular sentiment. Of all the branches of federal government, only the House of Representatives was to be chosen by popular vote, at the time limited to property-owning white males. State legislatures picked Senators while the President, America’s king, was to be elected by a small body of notables and ruling class representatives, in the same way that the nobility of ancient Rome chose so many emperors. The Electoral College, under the sway of America’s financial interests, ensured that only vetted
representatives of the elite would be elected, although on occasion a Jackson or a Lincoln did sneak through. By the time the Electoral College became a handmaiden to the popular vote, the major political parties had assumed the task of selecting and refining candidates. These parties ensure that the two or three choices presented to the demos will faithfully defend and represent, above all else, the interests of the State and its “significant classes.”

However, as Lippmann recognized, “Nations make their histories to fit their illusions…What they know of it comes to them filtered through the golden lies of school-books and hallowed by the generous loyalty of their childhood.” Rule by our financial elites, established in our Constitution, has been cloaked in a veil of patriotism and democracy. Only on rare occasion has our demos been able to translate into practice the noble sentiments of the Declaration. With notable exceptions we have lacked the fortitude and wherewithal to fight for them. American schools, I will argue, belong largely to our ruling class, functioning as State institutions to inspire child-like reverence for the “free market” and to instill obedient loyalty to the State, no differently than the churches of a previous age.

Following the country’s entrance into WWI, Bourne became increasingly aware of “the totalitarian potential of the bourgeois state.” Although nominally free, the working classes are bound to a system of production they do not own and whose products they cannot enjoy. According to Bourne, what we have in America is no longer “an old absurd feudal exploitation, [but] a new rational industrial exploitation.” Our political freedoms remain inert insofar as economic conditions prevent citizens from securing basic levels of prosperity and happiness. “When the relation of employer and employee gave one class economic power over the other,” he continued,

the equal rights of men before the law became almost an empty dignity. What avail was the guarantee of life and property to classes whose life and labor were infinitely cheap, and who possessed no property that any one would care to deprive them of? The most perfect political rights could scarcely prevent such classes from falling into a practical economic serfdom, holding their livelihood, as they did, at the mercy of another.

In order to enforce its social “contract,” the State collects taxes to establish an apparatus of police, courts, and schools whose primary function is the defense of wealth and property. Without these institutions, wagedom could not exist and our sickening extremes of splendor and poverty could not be maintained. It is worth quoting at length from Tolstoy’s _The Kingdom of God Is Within You_ (1894):

The men of the ruling classes…We cannot pretend that we do not see the policeman who walks in front of the windows with a loaded revolver, defending us, while we eat our savoury dinner…We certainly know that if we shall finish eating our dinner, or seeing the latest drama, or having fun at a ball…we do so only thanks to the bullet in the policeman’s revolver and the soldier’s gun…All those men and those who live on them, their wives, teachers, children, cooks…live by the blood which in one way or another, by one class of leeches or by another, is sucked out of the working people; thus they live, devouring each day for their pleasures hundreds and thousands of work-days of the exhausted labourers…they see the
privations and sufferings of these labourers, of their children, old men, women, sick people...they not only do not diminish their luxury, do not conceal it, but impudently display before these oppressed labourers...their parks, cajoles, theatres, chases, races...[At the same time they also] assure themselves and one another that they are all very much concerned about the good of the masses...[On Sundays they dress up and drive in expensive carriages to church.] houses especially built for the purpose of making fun of Christianity...[There they listen to men] preach to one another of the love of men—[all of which they] deny with their whole lives...Men who own large tracts of land or who have large capitals, or who receive large salaries, which are collected from the working people, who are in need of the simplest necessities...are fond of believing that those prerogatives which they enjoy are not due to violence, but to an absolutely free and regular exchange of services...[They like to think that] these prerogatives are not only not the result of assault upon people, and the murder of them...but have even no connection whatsoever with these cases.\[42\]

Just prior to the 2011 outbreak of the Wall Street occupation J.P. Morgan Chase & Company donated $4.6 million to the New York Police Department. The company’s chief executive officer and chairman, Jamie Dimon, sent together with the donation a letter of “profound gratitude” to NYPD Commissioner Raymond Kelly. “These officers,” Dimon wrote, “put their lives on the line every day to keep us safe.”\[43\] But the officers of the NYPD protect more than men such as Dimon when they bludgeon protesters and dismantle their tent cities. The police act to secure and maintain the basic rules of our political economy and to defend capitalism from the threat of democracy. It is difficult to blame the police officer who cracks skulls in defense of robber barons. He is only doing what he must in order to keep his job so that his family might eat. How hard it is to blame a human being, so profoundly human, for putting the concerns of spouse and children before all else.

Reflecting on the impending Southwest Railroad Strike of 1886, financier and railroad tycoon, Jay Gould, famously stated that he was unconcerned because, “I can hire one half of the working class to kill the other half.”\[44\] Gould, just over a century ago, made no attempt to conceal the brutal realities of the class struggle. Since his time our culture has cleaned up its diction to please the delicate palate of liberal society; yet the same material relations of violence that ravaged the working class in 1886 continue to plague it today.

Throughout the dissertation thus far I have alluded to a “ruling class,” “significant class,” “oligarchy,” &c. Although it is not my intent to focus upon the evil of this group, a few words are due them. Since the country’s earliest days, large corporate interests have aligned themselves with government. During times of war, powerful businessmen from New York moved to war management posts in Washington without fundamentally altering their strategies and techniques.\[45\] By the Progressive Era, Lippmann and Bourne believed that some powerful social set, international in character, numbering perhaps one thousand, and centered largely in London, was responsible for engineering public opinion. The private interests of this small group of individuals ultimately came to be shared by the
masses. Their personal passions regarding war and peace, social strategy, and the distribution of political power, shaped the contours of the modern world. Even Dewey admitted to the probable accuracy of this account.

More recently, Kurt Vonnegut laughed at the question of whether there is a ruling class in America, responding “You can buy a jet plain, you can buy a President.” “I’m afraid there is an American ruling class,” remarked Walter Cronkite, “and it doesn’t serve democracy very well. It is the rich who command our industry, commerce, finance, and are able to manipulate our democracy. They really control it.” According to former State Department spokesman, Hodding Carter, members of today’s ruling class can be found among the Council of Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission.

Looking at the stock market, economist Doug Henwood points out that a very small group of rich persons owns the largest institutions that run the economy. Ownership is now more concentrated than ever; most of us are just spectators. Greg Kushner, director of the Lido Wealth Conference, says that his annual gathering draws representatives of the country’s wealthiest hundred families, each worth an average of half a billion dollars. These families, he claims, are growing in number and riches. Asked whether or not this concentration is a good thing, Kushner responds that it certainly is. These wealthy families are philanthropists after all and do very good things for the poor.

Born into “the one percent,” Steve Forbes, chief executive officer of Forbes, Inc., believes that everyone in society should have a chance to discover their unique talent. In a free country such as ours, talent rises to the top. Capitalism, Forbes states, is a moral endeavor. Through self-seeking, everyone helps everyone else; the system is set up to only reward those who do good for others. Similarly, Bain Capital broker, Edward Conard, argues in his book, Unintended Consequences (2012), that the spectacular inequality and concentration of wealth in our society is a positive sign. The super rich—Conard is estimated to be worth hundreds of millions—invest their money in productive enterprises that make life better for everyone. Large investments into the computer industry, for example, have resulted in wondrous machines that enrich our lives. Conard illustrates his point with a personal example:

I worked with the company that makes the machine that tapers [aluminum cans]. It saves a fraction of a penny on every can. There are a lot of soda cans in the world. That means the economy can produce more cans with the same amount of resources. It makes every American who buys a soda can a little bit richer because their paycheck buys more.

Much of the world today is shaped by the ideas of Ayn Rand and her disciples. Rand insisted upon self-interest as the only ethic upon which civilization could thrive. Her one-time colleague and confidant, Milton Friedman, also a Nobel laureate economist, contends that the greed and ambition of the wealthiest are the only energies capable of elevating society and its poor. For Friedman, Rand’s
*Atlas Shrugged* (1957) is a fair description of reality. Titans of industry hold the world upon their shoulders. The child-like poor must thank these colossi for what little they have. Friedman insists that despite inequality, the lot of the poor is much better now than ever. The tide has lifted their boats along with those of the rich.

Another Rand disciple, Alan Greenspan, served as Chairman of the Federal Reserve, the most powerful, unelected, and unaccountable banking cartel in the world, from 1987 to 2006. Throughout those two decades Greenspan helped shape the contours of the global economy. Robert Reich, economist and Secretary of Labor under President Bill Clinton, describes Rand and her offspring as Social Darwinists who have always believed that the poor should be left to languor and die in order to rid the population of their inferior genes. For decades now, the Ayn Rand Institute has endeavored to place her books, together with free lesson plans and teaching aids, into the hands of schoolchildren and teachers throughout America. Having considered the cultural and intellectual history of our capitalist State, let us now visit a more empirical and aesthetic account of our political economy as it currently stands and consider what sorts of persons it is educating.

Welcome to the Jungle

“*Hunger will tame the fiercest animals, it will teach decency and civility, obedience and subjection to the most perverse...it is only hunger which can spur and goad [the poor] on to labor...it calls forth the most powerful exertions.*”

*Joseph Townsend, Dissertation on the Poor Laws, 1786*

“*Men are persecuted, robbed and slaughtered, and their wives are abused worse than death—all to obtain or retain positions that barely keep starvation from the door. It is a pit of infamy where men are driven lower than the degradation of slaves and compelled to sacrifice their wives and daughters to the villainous foremen and little bosses to be allowed to work.*”

*Reverend Father A.F. Toner, concerning conditions at the Pressed Steel Car Company, McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania, 1909*

October 31, 2005

*This Halloween, George A. Romero’s Land of the Dead (2005) revisited the classic Hollywood zombie movie with a bit of folk myth and wisdom. A zombie apocalypse has broken out and turned the world upside-down. Most men and women struggle to eat while avoiding becoming zombie dinner. Although a gated city has been established in an attempt to insulate the living, parties must still venture outside to scavenge for food. Within this city there is an inner sanctum, a luxurious and heavily fortified high-rise called Fiddler’s Green. From here the kingpin of remaining civilization, played by Dennis Hopper, rules with an iron fist, hiring armed goons to protect him and selling boys and girls as flesh slaves. Invitations to inhabit Fiddler’s Green, where one can enjoy fine dining, maid service, and peaceful slumber, do not come cheap or easy. This is the refuge of the power elite.*
Outside, the masses scramble to remain alive, digging through the garbage for scraps of food and sleeping with one eye open.

December 16, 2011

In the wake of President Obama’s assurance that all troops would leave Iraq by the end of the year, Democracy Now’s Amy Goodman interviewed Yanar Mohammed, president of the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq. Mohammed agonizes over the estimated more-than-one-million Iraqis killed and millions of refugees displaced since 2003. The Iraqis, she explains, have never been a rich people. For decades, the lion’s share of the country’s wealth and resources fueled the luxury of a cruel dictator. That dictator has since perished and his riches have been looted and destroyed. However, Mohammed laments, people at least had a fair chance of staying alive under Hussein’s despotic rule. Most were able to find jobs and feed their families. Today the people are poorer and hungrier than ever. Infrastructure is crumbling. Roads are so bad that one can hardly drive a car on them. What is more, there are no jobs. In order to earn money to survive, fathers sell their daughters into the now-vibrant flesh-slave market. What remains, says Mohammed, is the old opulence, albeit in different form. The power elite resides in a fortified inner sanctum called the Green Zone. This is where the hundreds of millions of dollars sent into the country by the United States each day go. The Green Zone “swims in wealth,” shielded from the murderous sectarian warfare that plagues and ravages the poor.

October 7, 2011

The Fiscal Policy Institute reports that New York City, financial capital of the planet, is the most unequal city in America. If it were a country, it would rank 15th-worst among 134, “a true Banana Republic,” as Christopher Ketcham puts it. In NYC are headquartered the dozen institutions controlling more than half the world’s financial assets. The top one percent of the city’s households brings in an average of $3.4 million per year, while half of the city’s households make less than $30 thousand. Homelessness stands at a record 113 thousand while 900 thousand more residents live in “deep poverty,” $10,500 or less annually for a family of four. Only 40 years ago, real estate developer Daniel Friedenberg predicted that NYC would become “a grotesquely enlarged medieval town with each caste in its own quarter.”

In well-populated, privately-owned lands, masters no longer require the lash to drive their slaves to work; depravation, hunger, and competition for jobs do so much more effectively. Using data from 2010, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) labels more than 17 million households, or 50 million Americans, including 16 million children, as “food insecure.” This is the highest number ever recorded. 97 percent of such households report skipping meals while 28 percent do not eat for whole days. Meanwhile, mayors in 29 cities claim that one in four people needing emergency food assistance does not receive it. Boston area doctors have reported dramatic spikes in malnourtioned babies, who will likely be left with lasting learning and developmental problems. Rather than a sad fact of material scarcity, this widespread and devastating hunger is a logical, organizational consequence of an economy that sees food not as a human need, but rather a resource
for the growth and accumulation of capital. When food in a capitalist society cannot serve its profit-generating function, the people will starve.

As recently as the 1970’s, economists entertained the notion that there is just not enough food to go around. Thomas Malthus was correct, they believed, that the Earth cannot materially sustain an ever-expanding population. Now forty years later, scholarly consensus holds that there is plenty of food to go around, even for the world’s seven billion people.61 25 years ago, Frances Moore Lappe and colleagues reported that world grain production alone could provide 3600 calories daily to every human on the planet, enough to make everyone fat, before counting the supply of vegetables, legumes, roots, fruits, meat, and fish.62 Even in India, where 300 million people are estimated to be starving, a reallocation of less than six percent of its total food production could wipe out hunger.63 For U.S. farmers especially, overproduction remains a major problem. Not only are they paid government subsidies to leave fields fallow; enormous surpluses of grain and dairy are dumped into rivers and lakes every day in order to keep market prices steady. Writing in American Wasteland (2010), Jonathan Bloom estimates that Americans waste close to 600 billion pounds of food annually, enough to fill the Ohio State University football stadium every day.64

In his recent publication, Life, Inc.: How the World Became a Corporation and How to Take it Back (2011), Douglas Rushkoff explains that there is more than enough food to feed the world. Modern technology has progressed to the point that only a small percentage of the world’s population engaged in agriculture can generate sufficient calories and nutrition to keep everyone alive and healthy. The problem, he writes, is that “We are attempting to use the logic of a scarce marketplace to negotiate things that are actually in abundance. What we lack is…a way of fairly distributing the bounty we have generated through our technologies.”65

Hunger is a function of crushing poverty. For 2011, the federal government set the official poverty line at $10,890 for a single person and $18,530 for a family of three. “Low-income” constitutes annual earnings below 200 percent those figures.66 While the United States Census Bureau reported that 46 million Americans lived in poverty in 2010, the National Academy of Sciences charges the Bureau with using a flawed methodology that underestimates the amount by approximately ten million.67 According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), child poverty in the United States stands at 23 percent, second-highest among 35 “developed” nations, behind only Romania. The figure is strikingly higher for minority children at 38 percent.68

Although 2011 Census data shows that a record number of Americans, one out of every two, is either poor or low-income, a report recently issued by Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW), titled “The Basic Economic Security Tables for the United States,” finds the government’s definitions of both “poverty” and “low-income” to be far below what families require in order to provide for basic
needs. WOW estimates that a single worker requires at least $30 thousand per year; this works out to a wage of more than $14 per hour, twice the national minimum wage of $7.25. In kind, the group’s report calculates that a single parent of two children needs $58 thousand per year to meet basic needs, including retirement savings and health insurance, and accounting for an 11 percent rate of inflation and 66 percent increase in the cost of living overall.69

At the same time, America’s official long-term unemployment rate is the highest recorded since 1948. With 34 million reporting that they need work, we arrive at a 23 percent combined unemployment and underemployment rate, compared with the official figure of only nine percent.70 While new jobs are being added to the economy, the vast majority are in industries such as retail, hospitality, and home health care, jobs unlikely to pay a living wage. Additionally, while ten million families have lost their homes to foreclosure since 2007, another 11 million are expected to do so by 2017.71 It has been many decades since this many Americans have felt insecure regarding the most basic necessities of life: food, shelter, and healthcare.72

Meanwhile, the top economic one percent in our economy owns 40 percent of all wealth. From 2008 to 2009 the average annual income of America’s top 74 earners ballooned from $91 million to $519 million.73 According to the Stanford University Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality, the top economic ten percent owns 73 percent of all national wealth while the bottom 60 percent together account for only four percent.74 The “one-percenters” own as much as the bottom 90 percent combined. There has been a massive redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich over the past 30 years, especially during the past ten.

More than a century after Horatio Alger’s death, and in the face of tremendous countervailing evidence, the vast majority of Americans from all demographics underestimates the current level of inequality in the nation while overestimating its own chances for improving its economic standing.75 In 2003, Alan Wolfe conducted a study of middle-class Americans asking whether they “agreed” or “somewhat agreed” with the statement, “most people who want to get ahead can make it [into the middle class] if they are willing to work hard.” 72 percent answered in the affirmative; only 25 percent responded that they did not think hard work was a guarantee of success. In an earlier study, Wolfe found that 65 percent of middle-class Americans believed that the poverty of inner-city dwellers was due to their lack of work ethic.76 In the same spirit, a 1999 national poll of young Americans aged 18 to 29 found that 55 percent believed it was either “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that they would someday be rich.77 More recently, a 2010 Pew Research Poll found that although 68 percent of Americans ages 18 to 29 reported not currently making as much money as they wanted, 88 percent “expect to earn enough money in the future to live the good life.”78
Perhaps due to the indelible imprint left by our frontier heritage, a majority of Americans believes that either they or their children will some day achieve the American Dream. Yet statistics tell us that people rarely end up at different economic levels than their parents. Here in the “land of opportunity,” intergenerational economic mobility is now lower than at any time during the 19th century; we rank all the way at the bottom among other wealthy nations. It typically takes five generations to see a difference in a family’s economic level. Although polls show that the overwhelming majority of Americans prefers a more even distribution of wealth—over 90 percent prefer the Swedish distribution—few express support for policies designed to push the country in this direction. Faith in progress overpowers rational calculation. Most believe that a place awaits them somewhere at the top of the pyramid. In the face of an instinctive revolt against sickening inequality, Horatio Alger continues to assure us that we can make it on our own by selling ourselves for a wage.

While wealth remains a key ingredient of democracy in the modern world, there is another way in which wealth, and the desire for it, are antithetical to democracy. The word “rich” derives from the Latin rex, or “king.” In olden days, to be rich meant to command the power of a king, power over others. One can only wield this power when others do not. Thus, it is not wealth that the rich man commands, but other people by means of wealth. Similarly, poverty exists in at least two forms. In addition to material poverty, the economic system organizes certain persons as poor. Being poor, in this sense, means being controlled by the economic power of others. The poverty of one generates the riches of another, just as labor by one supplies leisure for another, and as the humiliation of poverty breeds the pride of wealth.

In 1840, Orestes Brownson implored America to ask itself what it was constantly throwing in the face of the old world. What about this country makes it so much more just and free? If we are going to come to terms with the social and material realities of our political economy, we would do well to see not only its similarities with the old world, but also its similarities with the rest of the current-day world. The fortunes of the world’s wealthiest, businesspersons and dictators alike, have been amassed according to the same fundamental processes and relationships endemic to State societies.

2007 statistics from the Federal Reserve Board’s Survey of Consumer Finances (SFC) showed the six heirs to the Walton Wal-Mart fortune holding a net total of $70 billion, equal to the wealth of the poorest 30 percent of all Americans. $70 billion was also the estimated net worth of long-time Egyptian dictator, Hosni Mubarak, just prior to his early-2011 ouster. Mubarak ranked number one among the wealthiest people in the world, making him “the winner of capitalism,” as Jack Steuf so tragic-comically reported. Considered in the light of their objective relationship to the working class, few structural differences can be found between Mubarak and the Walton family. In
both cases, supported by a State apparatus of police, courts, and judges, one class extracts the lion’s share of the fruits of the labor of the majority through a legal process of theft. Whereas Mubarak capitalized the resources and labor of an entire nation, the Waltons capitalize the labor of proletarians around the world, from sweatshops in China, to retail stores in Ohio. With more than two million employees, Wal-Mart ranks as the world’s third-largest employer behind only the United States Department of Defense and the People’s Liberation Army of China. Recently-released SFC data shows that the Walton fortune grew to $93 billion by 2010, a $23 billion increase in only three years. These six family members now collectively wield more wealth—read social power—than the poorest 100 million Americans.

The most successful capitalists of the world, no matter their nationality or political ideology, have been those men and women most capable of exploiting the labor-capital relation inherent to the political economy that now dominates most of the world. They have best learned how to play by the rules of this game and to rewrite those rules as needed. These individuals have successfully located the hungry and the poor, set them to work for a miserable wage, and invested heavily in police, lobbyists, and union-busting law firms. In order to achieve so much, these capitalists have wrought remarkable physical and psychological violence upon the workers of the world, including not only brute physical force, but also infirmity and psychological terror, namely the terror of being fired from work and left without the means to buy bread.

In the richest nation in the history of the world, as many as 250 million Americans, or five-sixths of the national population, live only two paychecks or fewer away from insolvency. In the year 2000, for example, 875 thousand Americans died as a direct result of the dangers attributable to poverty and inequality: racial segregation, lack of access to quality education and social support, unsafe living environments, as well as lack of access to decent food and healthcare. Calculating the dramatic increase in poverty over the past decade, together with state and federal cuts to social service programs, medical researchers at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health estimate that 1.3 million Americans will die unnecessarily this year, no doubt genocidal proportions. The stakes of our ongoing class war are mortal indeed; and they are educating a new generation of Americans with both disturbing and inspiring consequences.

Conclusion

“This year Occupy confronted the country with very serious economic issues. How has our regime responded? With dialogue and intellectual engagement? No, its only answer was repression and violence. Zero tolerance for real dissent.”

Richard Wolff, “Can We Afford Capitalism?” 2012
Wage slavery bears an unmistakable likeness to chattel slavery. Although our masters have not claimed *de jure* ownership over our bodies, the same logic and relations of property that once governed the Southern slave trade today secures capital’s *de facto* ownership over the content of our lives. Because the working class has no alternative means to make a living, it is forced to engage in a legalized form of prostitution. Rather than spending our energies realizing our own aims and projects, we must resign our lives to following the directives of a capitalist and consent to surrendering to him the greater portion of the fruits of our labors.

Wage work entails both physical and psychic violence upon its victims. Within this relationship, the capitalist is compelled to treat the worker as a beast of burden, something less than a fully human person. Although this antagonism boiled above the surface for much of our country’s history, it was quelled during the latter half of the 20th century by the modern sciences of Psychology and Management, which, in the interest of the capitalist class, “adjusted” labor to its alienated condition. These sciences have helped to conceal the fact that any mode of production is primarily a mode of creating not commodities, but persons. Capitalist industry has manufactured for the 21st century a type of human person heretofore unknown.

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8 Quoted in Lasch, 183.


10 Ibid.

11 Sources estimate that upwards of 80 percent of land, corporate stocks, and food supplies belong to less than one percent of the population and concentrated within the top tenth of that one percent. See Harrington, *The Accidental Century*, 82. Also see Christopher Cook, “Big Food Must Go: Why We Need

12 Kropotkin.

13 Attitudes and understandings of the role played by police seem again to depend upon one’s economic class. Police enforce the law of the State. As it is colloquially said, property is nine-tenths of the law. Thus the police defend those who hold property. Residents of the middle and upper classes might then reasonably see the police to be protecting and serving them. But those of us in the bottom three-fifths of the economy have no property of which to speak. Rather than viewing the police as our protectors, we tend to see them as threats. As Jimmy Carter so eloquently put it in his 1974 Law Day speech before the Georgia Bar Association, “it may be that poor people are the only ones who commit crimes, but I know that they are the only ones who serve prison sentences.” Jimmy Carter, “Law Day Address” (University of Georgia, May 4, 1974), http://www.narsil.org/index/people/jimmycarter/lawday.

14 Ibid.

15 Adam Smith made this argument as well. See Muller, 74.

16 Ibid.


19 Ibid.


21 There is a great contemporary illustration of this idea in Appalachia today. Driving into Charleston, West Virginia, one can see billboards reading “Obama’s No Jobs Zone.” Recent increased regulations imposed upon the coal and mountaintop removal mining industries have instigated a sort of civil war between environmental activists and miners. In response to the new regulations, the mining companies have cried “job killer,” claiming that the economic burden has forced them to lay off employees. Other sources point to mechanization and union-busting on the part of the companies as the true source of unemployment. As a concession, regulators have allowed the companies themselves to enforce the new standards. Medical reports show that they have not held up this end of the bargain as people living near mining sites have a 50 percent greater risk of fatal cancer and the rate of birth defects has risen 42 percent. The miners themselves are contracting black lung at a rate unseen in decades. Yet the mining company’s propaganda is succeeding as miners turn violently upon environmentalists and those advocating for safety protections, shooting and setting their homes ablaze, killing their pets, and issuing death threats. See Jason Howard, “Appalachia Turns on Itself,” New York Times (July 8, 2012), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/09/opinion/appalachia-turns-on-itslef.html.


24 Bourne, “The State.”


26 Lippmann, Drift and Mastery, 101. Also see Charles Beard, An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 2004 (1913)).


29 King George had forbidden colonial land speculators from pushing westward into Indian Territory. This is how George Washington and others built much of their fortune. Zinn, 77-102.

30 Ibid., 59-76.

31 Ibid.


33 Ibid.


37 Ibid.

38 Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery*, 101.

39 Olaf Hansen, in his Introduction to *The Radical Will*, 57.

40 Randolph Bourne, “The Doctrine of the Rights of Man as Formulated by Thomas Paine,” in *The Radical Will*, 244.

41 Ibid.


51 Ibid.

52 The ARI website published the following: “ARI seeks to spearhead a cultural renaissance that will reverse the anti-reason, anti-individualism, anti-freedom, anti-capitalist trends in today’s culture. The major battleground in this fight for reason and capitalism is the educational institutions—high schools and, above all, the universities, where students learn the ideas that shape their lives…To date, more than 1.4 million copies of these Ayn Rand novels have been donated to 30,000 teachers in 40,000 classrooms across the United States and Canada. Based on a projected shelf life of five years per book, we estimate that more than 3 million young people have been introduced to Any Rand’s books and ideas as a result of our programs to date…partnerships have been established between ARI and the corporate community to advance Ayn Rand’s ideas in the universities. Through ARI’s assistance, Ayn Rand’s ideas are taught and studies at more than 50 of America’s most influential institutions of higher education…” These institutions include: Clemson University, Duke University, University of Virginia, University of Texas at Austin, University of Pittsburgh, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Brown University, University of Kentucky, University of South Carolina, University of Florida, University of West Virginia and Wake Forest University. Source: Pam and Russ Martens, “Resurrecting Ayn Rand: How Corporate Money Pushes Economic Poison on Campus,” *CounterPunch* (February 28, 2012), http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/02/28/resurrecting-ayn-rand-hedge-fund-money-teams-up-with-koch-bbt/.


Ibid., 9.

Ibid., 11.

William Rathje and Cullen Murphy, Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage (University of Arizona Press, 2001). Also see Jonathan Bloom, “Americans Waste Enough Food to Fill a 90,000-seat Football Stadium Every Day—What Can We Do About It?” AlterNet (September 15, 2011), www.alternet.org/story/152429/. Bloom’s estimate includes the ‘waste’ of the meat industry. It takes hundreds of pounds of food to produce one pound of beef, for example. Jeremy Seifert puts the lowball estimate, not including the meat industry, at 96 billion pounds wasted annually. Also see Dive! Living off America’s Waste, Dir. Jeremy Seifert (2010).


Ibid.

The Commonwealth Fund 2010 Biennial Health Insurance Survey as well as the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured find that over 50 million Americans are uninsured while another 25 million are underinsured. A 2009 report from Harvard Medical School shows that more than one million Americans are bankrupted by medical expenses each year, over two-thirds of whom are insured. Sara Collins, et al., “Help Is on the Way: How the Recession Has Left Millions of Workers Without Health Insurance, and How Health Reform Will Bring Relief,” The Commonwealth Fund 2010 Biennial Health Insurance Survey (March, 2011), http://www.commonwealthfund.org/~media/Files/Publications/Fund%20Report/2011/Mar/1486_Collins_h


77 Bulman, 140.


80 Ibid.

81 Despite the fact that our current level of inequality is higher than at any time during the 20th century, including just prior to the Great Depression, 70 percent of Americans support a repeal of the estate tax, which only affects the estates of those in that top one percent. See Norton & Ariely and Sawhill.

82 C. Douglas Lummis, Radical Democracy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 70-76. Similarly, the Old English translation of “purchase,” pro capitare, meant “seizing or taking forcibly or with violence; pillage; plunder; robbery; capture.”

83 Brownson, “The Laboring Classes.”


88 A study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences finds that members of the “upper class” are more likely to behave unethically compared to the less wealthy. For example, the
wealthy subjects were “more likely to break the law while driving, take candy from children, lie in
negotiations, cheat to increase their odds of winning prizes, and endorse unethical behavior at work.”
Furthermore, researchers found that wealthier people tended to “perceive greed as positive and beneficial.”
See Paul Piff, “Higher Social Class Predicts Unethical Behavior,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of
Sciences*, Vol. 109, No. 11 (March 13, 2012), 4086-4091. Also see Elizabeth Lopatto, “Self-Interest Spurs
Society’s ‘Elite’ To Lie, Cheat On Tasks, Study Finds,” *Bloomberg* (February 28, 2012),
researchers-find.html.

90 Findings from a 1999-2003 Cornell University study find that attempts by workers to organize and fight
for better pay and working conditions are almost always met by hostility and coercion from management.
The study reports that it is “standard practice for workers to be subjected to threats, interrogation,
harassment, surveillance, and retaliation for union activity.” According to Art Levine, the U.S. provides its
workers the weakest protections among countries in the developed world. Union-busting, he calculates,
“has become a multibillion-dollar industry encompassing more than 2500 lawyers and consultants.” Kate
Bronfenbrenner, “No Holds Barred: The Intensification of Employer Opposition to Organizing,” *Economic
Policy Institute*, Briefing Paper #235 (May 20, 2009),
http://www.americanrightsatwork.org/dmdocuments/ARAWReports/noholdsbarred.pdf. Also see Joshua
Holland, “Conservatives Fight to Let Corporate Bosses Break Laws Protecting Their Workers,” *AlterNet*

91 David DeGraw, “Analysis of Financial Terrorism in America: Over 1 Million Deaths Annually, 62
Million People with Zero Net Worth, as the Economic Elite Make off with $46 Trillion” (August 10, 2011),
http://ampedstatus.org/exclusive-analysis-of-financial-terrorism-in-america-over-1-million-deaths-

92 Approximately 245,000 deaths in the United States in 2000 were attributable to low education, 176,000
to racial segregation, 162,000 to low social support, 133,000 to individual-level poverty, 119,000 to income
inequality, and 39,000 to area-level poverty. See Sandro Galea, et al., “Estimated Deaths Attributable to
1456-1465. The Institute of Medicine reports that 18,000 die each year because they cannot afford
healthcare.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE EDUCATION OF WORK

Introduction

“[W]e see not merely individuals, but whole classes of men, developing but one part of their potentialities, while of the rest, as in stunted growths, only vestigial traces remain…With this confining of our activity to a particular sphere we have given ourselves a master within, who not infrequently ends by suppressing the rest of our potentialities…enjoyment is separated from labor, the means from the end, exertion from recompense. Everlasting chained to a single little fragment of the Whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment; everlastingly in his ear the monotonous sound of the wheel that he turns, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of putting the stamp of humanity upon his own nature, he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his occupation, of his specialized knowledge.”

Friedrich Schiller, Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind, 1795

“Alas! If read rightly, these perfectnesses are a sign of a slavery in England a thousand times more bitter and more degrading than that of the scourged African or helot Greek…It is not that men are pained by the scorn of the upper classes, but they cannot endure their own; for they feel that the kind of labour to which they are condemned is verily a degrading one, and makes them less than men…And the great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities, louder than the furnace blast, is all in very deed this—that we manufacture everything there except men…It is not labor that is divided, but the men themselves; divided into segments of men, fragments and crumbs of life. The laborer grinds his pinheads with the sand of his soul. In the factories is manufactured everything except men.”

John Ruskin, The Stones of Venice, 1851

August 20, 1971

Today Professor Philip Zimbardo’s “prison experiment,” conducted in the basement of the Stanford University Department of Psychology, ended only six days after it began. Attempting to discover the power of situations and environments to mold human behavior, and to discern the limits of “dispositional attribution,” a theory holding that human behavior is shaped by personal character, Zimbardo recruited 24 “normal, healthy male college students who were predominantly middle class and white” to enact the roles of guards and inmates. For two weeks the “prisoners” were to inhabit a small jail in which the “guards” were charged with maintaining order and discipline. On the morning of day two, a full-scale rebellion had begun with prisoners barricading their cell doors, stripping off their inmate numbers, cursing at guards and refusing to comply with orders. In response the guards sprayed skin-chilling CO2 into the cells, stripped the prisoners naked, placed them in
chains, removed their bedding, and held the ringleaders in solitary confinement. Fearing further disorder, the guards next sought to crush the prisoners’ spirits. Abuse and degradation escalated with the guards laughing as they forced prisoners to perform mock sodomy on each other. After only thirty-six hours the first prisoner experienced an emotional breakdown. Five in all had to be released early due to depression, rage, and acute anxiety. Upon the fifth day an outside observer insisted that Zimbardo end the experiment as it was becoming all too “real” for the subjects. The guards had begun to enjoy the power they exercised over the inmates. Zimbardo later concludes that situations can corrupt the best and brightest of us all. Each of us, he believes, is capable of both great good and terrific evil.³

The ontology of the Western Enlightenment that continues to dominate the modern mind, both popular and scholarly, posits that objects, or commodities, are the ultimate ends of production. Instead I focus on the educational, or person-forming functions of our economic institutions. People, not commodities, are the primary result of any mode of production. As per the constitutive rules and logics of capitalist political economy, the laborer is educated as a beast of burden, a creature whose ultimate life function is to enlarge capital. Seen in this light, the habits and relations of our daily lives contribute to the reproduction of a slave society.

Producing Persons

“So that, as rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them, this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by not understanding them; and perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them.”

Giambatista Vico, The New Science, 1725⁴

“The understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments. The man whose life is spent in performing a few simple operations…has no occasion to exert his understanding…He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. The torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgement concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life. Of the great and extensive interests of his country he is altogether incapable of judging…The uniformity of his stationary life naturally corrupts the courage of his mind…His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expense of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues. But in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall…”

In his famous debate with Booker T. Washington over the proper aims of the education of the emancipated African-American, W.E.B. Du Bois insisted that it was not men and women’s material condition that stood in the greatest need of improvement following the dark night of slavery. Generations spent under the conditions of enslavement had impoverished the African-American’s soul. It was the soul that yearned most for the nourishment of education. Rather than teaching carpentry and homemaking, as Washington had prescribed, Du Bois wanted students to learn the historical, philosophical, and literary nature of their being. What Du Bois understood far better than his contemporary was that conditions and habits of daily living are constitutive elements of the human person, whose spirit may lie dormant and stunted if not given proper opportunity and exercise.

The economic anthropologist, David Graeber, argues that the chattel and wage modes of production share certain basic features. In both cases, a small exploiting class appropriates the value produced by a much larger class. With chattel slavery, the exploiters directly own the primary producers. With wage slavery, the exploiters own the means of production and the primary producers are compelled to sell their labor. Both systems require coercive juridical and policing bodies to enforce and defend these basic relationships. Looking back to the ancient world, we find a plethora of slave and servile wage relations, many of which coexisted. These ancients, however, spoke of property and labor according to a logical grammar that has since largely been lost.

For example, Cato and Brutus always talked about what types of property, including slaves held as property, created the best citizens. Property and wealth were never treated as ends in themselves. Rather, human beings were always conceived as the ultimate aim of production. Marx pointed to this in *The German Ideology (1846)*, writing that modes of production, with or without conscious intent, always produce particular kinds of persons. By contrast, modern economic science disappears the entire question of capitalism’s spiritual effect on the worker, thus turning the ancient understanding of the aims of production on its head.

Graeber points out that most of the world’s societies understand material production symbolically. Homes, boats, and gardens always encode representational or ritualistic structures of meaning. *Feng Shui*, the Chinese art of geomancy, assumes a strong relationship between the quality of an environment and the character of the person who inhabits it. The routines, habits, and social relations inherent to our jobs affect us mentally, physically, and spiritually.

My friend and colleague, Brad Rowe, illustrates the traumatic psychological effects wrought upon the “stickers” working in slaughterhouses who must, in order to earn a living, murder thousands of pigs each day. Just as much as the pigs, Rowe argues, these human beings are the victims of inhumane treatment. Stickers confess that the automated killing of swine eradicates their capacity for
empathy until they lose regard for human life. In her muckraking account of factory farms, Slaughterhouse (2007), Gail Eisnitz recounts the following worker’s testimony:

Another thing that happens is that you don’t care about people’s pain anymore. I used to be very sensitive about people’s problems…Pigs down on the kill floor have come up and nuzzled me like a puppy. Two minutes later I had to kill them—beat them to death with a lead pipe. I can’t care…I have no problem pulling the trigger on a person—if you get in my face I’ll blow you away. Every sticker I know carries a gun, and every one of them would shoot you. Most stickers I know have been arrested for assault. A lot of them have problems with alcohol. They have to drink, they have no other way of dealing with killing live, kicking animals all day long.

The trauma endured by these men and women is perhaps analogous to the experiences of soldiers at war or assembly-line workers at China’s Foxconn factory who manufacture those iPhones, iPads, Kindles, and Xbox’s that we love so much.

According to investigative reporter, Charles Duhig, Foxconn has carried the exploitation of human labor to a scale and degree previously unseen in this world. Inside factories that house a quarter-million laborers, employees sleep eight to a room, sometimes work more than 24 hours without rest, and earn as little as 31 cents per hour. Duhig characterized what he saw during his visit to Foxconn as automated human labor, men and women converted into efficient machines. Each assembly-line worker performs a singular, minute operation such as soldering a small electrical connection, thousands upon thousands of times a day. “It’s so boring,” reports an anonymous employee. “I can’t bear it anymore. Every day was like, I get off from work, and I go to bed. I get up in the morning, and I go to work. It became my daily routine, and I almost felt like I was some kind of animal.” Facing a minimum 12 years in jail for even speaking of labor unions, the Chinese workers are left with few means of resistance. Some declare that suicide is their only weapon for challenging the company. This year, amongst a rash of suicides, the company responded by hanging nets underneath the factory’s windows in hopes of catching jumpers.

Most of the world’s workers know intimately the effects of mind-numbing, alienated labor and submission to a boss’s orders for eight hours a day, five days a week, fifty weeks a year. Yet commodity fetishism obscures the social relationships inherent to any marketplace interaction. We remain largely blind to the educational effects wrought upon those who work to produce what we consume.

Common to chattel and wage slavery is the separation of home and workplace. With the African slave trade, American slaveholders were able to appropriate all the time, effort, and care that another society had invested into producing a human being. Raising chattel slaves on the plantation was an extraordinarily costly affair and this is why, following Eli Whitney’s 1793 invention of the cotton gin,
the importation of slaves from Africa intensified manifold. It was cheaper to simply purchase a slave and his labor power than to cultivate it on the plantation.

The enslaved Africans experienced a “social death” as they were transported across the Atlantic and cut off from their homes, families, and communities. An analogous relation between home and workplace maintains in the case of wage slavery. Employers purchase from employees their labor power, their pure capacity to do work. The employer appropriates the workers’ productive and creative abilities, which are products of tremendous care and investment on the parts of families, communities, schools, religious institutions, and more. Thus, Graeber writes:

If one re-interprets a ‘mode of production’ to mean a relation between surplus extraction and the creation of human beings, then it is possible to see industrial capitalism as an introjected form of the slave mode of production, with a structurally analogous relation between workplace and domestic sphere…The Industrial Revolution also introduced the first form of economic organization to make a systematic distinction between homes and workplaces, between domestic and economic spheres. (This is what made it possible to begin talking about ‘the economy’ to begin with: the production of people and the production of commodities were to take place in different spaces by entirely different logics.)

Modern workers experience a “social death” analogous to the victims of the African slave trade. That is, both the passage from Africa to the American South and the drive from the home to the office are accompanied—ostensibly at least—by a severing of social ties and kinship relations espoused to have no bearing on the workplace. Hence we can, as Graeber suggests, “compare the morning commute to the Middle Passage…structurally they do seem to play exactly the same role. What is accomplished once, violently and catastrophically, in one variant, is repeated with endless mind-numbing drudgery in the other.”

Today’s worker, like the chattel slave of the antebellum South, figures into the mode of production as a beast of burden according to a purely caloric calculation blind to the process of creating persons. Whereas this alchemy was accomplished crudely and brutally with the 18th-century African slave, the reduction of a much larger class of persons to industrial beasts of burden has been achieved with help from the modern sciences of Psychology and Management. In fact, as C.L.R. James observed, the rationalized techniques of early American industry were largely developed and worked out on slave plantations. In neither of these institutions did educational concerns govern organizational decisions and developments. The logic of capital has precluded humanistic educational aims from shaping our working lives just as effectively and devilishly as white-supremacist and proto-eugenic ideologies precluded slaveholders from allowing their slaves to learn to read.

**Beasts of Burden**
“The active contenders for political power believe that human ends must be attained by the coercive direction of the life and labor of the people. This is contrary to the assumption of the whole struggle for emancipation.”

Walter Lippmann, The Good Society, 1937

“Today, every efficient office, every up-to-date factory is a panoptical prison in which the workers suffer...from the consciousness of being inside a machine.”

Aldous Huxley, 1950

“Since at least a century ago, a number of engineers, businessmen, and scientists realized that technology was no longer the limiting factor of production; now, it was man that could be engineered, and made still more efficient, given the right kind of motivation.”


The Hungarian philosopher, Georg Lukács, argued that the incorporation of workers into the modern capitalist economy robs them of their sense of agency. They become mechanical parts of processes designed to function with or without them, as in a closed system. Lacking the chance to practice their agency, workers learn to treat life passively. More devastatingly, Lukács thought, they lose the capacity to imagine any different kind of life.

It was not until the 20th century that wage labor became the predominant relation of production in the United States. Since then, nearly all forms of labor have become hired labor.

There is a distinction to be made between wage-workers and salaried professionals; but, as I will argue later, that distinction is now minimal. Having been incorporated into the logic of advanced corporate capitalism, the majority of both wage and salaried workers has surrendered its basic interests and responsibilities in production; its work has become alienated. This process of alienation has accompanied a progressive, scientific attempt to transform the human worker, as completely as possible, into the essentially non-human beast of burden whose primary life function is to labor for the enlargement of capital.

During the First American Republic, skilled craftsmen contracted with buyers and merchants to turn out specific amounts of commodities. Referred to as the putting-out, or workshop system, capitalists purchased finished products from tradesmen who produced in homes and independent shops, assuming responsibility for managing their own schedules, techniques, and conditions. It was the centralization of the labor process into the factory that forced workers to surrender their control over production and ultimately converted them into appendages to machines.

When a master employs a beast of burden in any process of production, he may take advantage only of the powers and abilities natural or instinctive to the beast. For example, bees can be
used to make honey, sheep to grow wool, cows to produce milk and beef, or bacteria to ferment grapes into wine. In 1832 Charles Babbage described a fascinating example of caterpillars put to use making silk veils:

A most extraordinary species of manufacture…has been contrived by an officer of engineers residing at Munich. It consists of lace, and veils, with open patterns in them, made entirely by caterpillars. The following is the mode of proceeding adopted: He makes a paste of the leaves of the plant, which is the usual food of the species of caterpillar he employs, and spreads it thinly over a stone, or other flat substance. He then, with a camel-hair pencil dipped in olive oil, draws upon the coating of paste the pattern he wishes the insects to leave open. This stone is then placed in an inclined position, and a number of the caterpillars are placed at the bottom. A peculiar species is chosen, which spins a strong web; and the animals commencing at the bottom, carefully avoiding every part touched by the oil, but devouring all the rest of the paste. The extreme lightness of these veils, combined with some strength, is truly surprising.24

Compared with other beasts of burden, the productive powers and capacities of the human laborer may be turned to an infinite variety of tasks. The human may be set not only to cranking widgets and filing papers, but also to solving equations, crafting market strategies, and executing institutional codes and formulae. He can even be trained to bludgeon, shoot, and torture others upon command. Because the worker has surrendered, or had forcibly taken from him, control over and interest in his daily productive activities, the employer must become a coercive master. This need gave birth to the modern studies of Scientific Management and Workplace Psychology.

From early on factories have been closely associated with other coercive institutions such as prisons, schools, offices, and slave plantations. Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, for example, incorporated a prison on one side and a factory on the other.25 By the early-20th century, Frederick Taylor had begun conducting motion studies to break down the processes, isolate and control the variables in operations as seemingly-simple as pig-iron shoveling. A pig-iron shoveler is himself too stupid to understand this industrial science, Taylor testified before Congress; therefore, in the interest of human progress, the worker must submit himself to the total direction of the scientific manager.26

According to Bourne, the scientific manager was a new thing that had come to dominate humankind:

He is the oil-can of the industrial establishment, rather than the real scientist of the industrial laboratory…He seems, in short, an industrial charmer. As he talks to us in his loud, full way, I conceive his intellectual technique to consist in the breaking down of resistance, so that scientific absolutism may come into its own.27

These managers, Bourne believed, had no sense for either the class struggle or the exploitation experienced by workers; and they held no vision whatsoever of industrial democracy.28

By 1946 the United States Steel Corporation had signed a contract with the Chief Industrial Organization Steel Workers specifying that its sand shovelers shall move 12.5 x 15 lbs. shovelfuls per minute and its staple packagers shall load and seal exactly 5.9 boxes per minute. In order to specify
how much, how fast, and in exactly what order the operation of 1,150 benchmark jobs would be
carried out, contract negotiators relied upon the “Methods-Time-Measurement (MTM)” index
developed by Westinghouse engineers Maynard, Schwab, and Stegmerton, which defined and
illustrated such work motions as “reach,” “turn,” “grasp,” “position,” &c., together with calculations
of precisely how much time each movement should take.29 Even punching a time clock was divided
into six steps and calculated to the fourth decimal place. The “satisfactions of craftsmanship are
gone,” as William F. Whyte put it, “and we can never call them back.”30 Although men such as
Taylor acknowledged the alienating and dehumanizing nature of modern industry, they argued that
such costs would be far outweighed by gains in productive scale and efficiency. Accepting that
alienation carries its own manner of inefficiencies, but unwilling to cede control of the labor process
to workers, Taylor’s progeny began the task of “adjusting” them to their fated roles as cogs in
industrial machines.

Between 1924 and 1932, industrial engineers at the Western Electric Company conducted
intensive experiments aimed at increasing worker productivity. With each adjustment and
readjustment of lighting, equipment, staffing, break, sleep, and meal schedules, productivity steadily
rose. That is, as observers paid increasing attention to the workers, they responded by intensifying
their activity. Later known as the “Hawthorne Effect,” the study arrived at the peculiar finding that
efficiency depends not primarily on the technical or organizational aspects of the labor process, but
rather the “human element.”31

20th-century trade unions such as the United Auto Workers (UAW) succeeded in creating a
culture of class-consciousness among their members, workers standing in solidarity against a source
of their shared malaise.32 As David Noble illustrates in America by Design: Science, Technology, and
the Rise of Corporate Capitalism (1977), the corporation soon learned that the next frontier of capital
growth lay not in further technological advance, but rather in squeezing additional productivity out of
workers.33 Toward this end, class-consciousness would have to be erased from the minds of
employees; at the same time, their malaise would be given new outlets, sanctions, and palliatives.

Borrowing from Soviet and North Korean prisoner interrogation tactics, behavioral
psychologists sold American corporations “thought reform” programs focused upon the organization
and manipulation of the workplace as a “total” social and psychological environment.34 Concomitant
with the decline of union membership, businesses began to mask the inherently adversarial
relationship between labor and management with a democratic language and symbol system, for
example by banishing the term “employee” in favor of “associate;” no longer “managers,” bosses have
become “team leaders.” Removed from the hierarchical work environment were status markers such
as distinctive uniforms, privileged restrooms and parking spaces. United together against rival shops
and companies, associates and team leaders would form the new in-group; all would learn to think “the company way.”  

Sociologists Mike Parker and Richard Ofshe find that corporate retreats carry out the most intensive episodes of worker re-education. Over the course of a weekend, workers and managers engage in trust exercises, falling blindfolded into the arms of their “team members.” In a technique referred to by psychologists as “emotional flooding,” captives are asked to reveal their deepest “joys, fears, and needs,” before receiving bombardments of praise. “Like the cults of the 1960’s and 1970’s, which also talked about creating ‘new families,’” writes Parker, “[t]he training takes people out of their normal environment. In the context of a very comfortable, controlled situation, feelings of insecurity and needs for belonging and intimacy are manipulated in an attempt to redefine workers’ identity.”  

Happiness issues not from social belonging per se, but from belonging to the company. According to anthropologist Laura Nader, virtually all oppressive systems of power, from colonial empires to transnational corporations, employ social harmony as a control mechanism. Those who express discontent are branded as “difficult” and accused of being poor “team-players.” To debate, criticize, or question, is to obstruct. Validation and fulfillment are to be found only in submission to the march of the corporate herd. An entire industry, known as “Positive Thinking,” “Transformational Positivity,” or “Appreciative Inquiry,” has driven into the mind of our culture the notion that unhappy people are ill. Positive thoughts bring positive results. By convincing ourselves that we are happy we can solve any problem and cure any disease. But these illusions can cripple us, making us less aware of our selves and others and compromising our ability to deal intelligently with the world. For the corporations, this is precisely the purpose. Insisting that the modern malaise originates inside the minds of sick individuals, the people are dissuaded from questioning the structures and forces responsible for their misery.

Western culture has long been fueled by the consumption of soft drugs, particularly tea, coffee, and spirits. A culture’s choice of drugs says a lot about who its people are. America today is a caffeine and alcohol culture. Businesses institute coffee breaks throughout the day because caffeine makes monotonous work easier. If coffee is not enough to get us through our over-scheduled days, products such as 5-Hour Energy promise to come to our rescue. Our capitalist culture sells us the drugs we need to keep up with the rat race and in so doing helps us intensify our own exploitation. In order to balance our chemistry at the end of the day and to anesthetize the physical and psychic trauma endured at our jobs, we purchase $100 billion of alcohol as a nation each year. By making beasts of ourselves we temporarily alleviate the pain of slavery.

In its July, 1973 issue, Science and the Future magazine reported that European veterinarians gathered at a convention in Lyons, France had grown concerned about the diseases and psychological
afflictions that develop in industrial breeding farms. The vets found that industrially-bred rabbits became prone to infections and parasites; factory-pigs began to cannibalize each other and chickens had to be given tranquilizers. In the vets’ language, industrially-bred animals suffer both psychically and physically; they somatize their living conditions.\textsuperscript{41} Similarly, industrial concentration and the scientific management of work have made humans sick.

Back in Marx’s time, it did not take sophisticated observation to see that factory workers were paid to hazard their physical health. Coal miners regularly died in tunnel collapses and gas leaks. Hundreds perished building the Hoover Dam, tens of thousands constructing the Panama Canal.\textsuperscript{42} Yet other exactions upon the psycho-somatic health of the laborer are less readily-apparent. In order that the corporate machine continue to operate efficiently, a 250-billion-dollar-per-year pharmaceutical industry now offers to sedate workers of the wealthy nations.\textsuperscript{43} These anxiety-reducing and mood-balancing drugs make our bondage tolerable. “That sinister state,” wrote Lewis Mumford regarding mid-20th-century industrial life,

manifests itself not merely in the statistics of crime and mental disorder, but in the enormous sums spent on narcotics, sedatives, stimulants, hypnotics and tranquilizers to keep the population of our ‘great cities’ from coming to terms with the vacuous desperation of their daily lives and even the more vacuous horrors that their rulers and scientific advisers seem to regard as a reasonable terminal for the human race.\textsuperscript{44}

Medical professionals have taken the same strategy toward schoolchildren. Currently three million students in American schools are medicated with either Ritalin or Adderall, both powerful drugs.\textsuperscript{45} Half a million children are on anti-psychotics and half of the country’s 18-and-under population meets criteria for some sort of mental disorder.\textsuperscript{46} As Ken Robinson puts it, we are literally anesthetizing our children to get them through school.\textsuperscript{47}

Whether it regards human or non-human animals, adults or schoolchildren, the science of making the office, school, or factory farm more tolerable has served the caloric calculation of capital growth. As recent studies show, worker productivity has shot through the roof over the course of the last generation. Stanford University and the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reports that productivity has increased by 80 percent since 1979 while wages have stagnated. Today the average worker accounts for $95 thousand of GDP while bringing home a before-tax median income of just over $40 thousand annually. The Bureau has data dating back to 1960, when the same GDP and income figures stood at $41 thousand and $35 thousand, respectively, and held steady for the next two decades.\textsuperscript{48} Monika Bauerlein and Clara Jeffrey refer to this as “The Great Speedup.”\textsuperscript{49} The figures point principally to the growing financialization of the economy and the burgeoning share of surplus value expropriated by capital.

Since 1870 it is estimated that output per work hour has increased 15-fold.\textsuperscript{50} The fruits of this increase have undoubtedly contributed to a shared material progress. Annual working hours have
declined for Americans since the 19th century: from 3000 in 1870, to 2350 by 1929, and to 1900 by 1973. However, this trend has since reversed. Together with increases in productivity, more Americans are out of work and those remaining are picking up the slack. Although today we are producing more goods and services than five years ago, we are doing so with six million fewer workers. Americans spend 255 more hours at work per year than Europeans. Half of us report feeling overworked and overwhelmed by our jobs, accompanied by stress, poor physical health, and depression. Compared to the United Kingdom, which offers new mothers 39 weeks of paid maternity leave, the United States guarantees none.

American culture pushes its members to accept a perpetual state of exhaustion as normal and even virtuous, leaving us insufficient time for our children, families, and selves. Just like their feudal predecessors, the lords and barons of modern industry, backed by a State apparatus and “free market” ideology, collect regular and increasing tribute from their employed subjects, whom they allow in exchange to subsist.

Although we can observe a trend of manipulation and psychological persuasion replacing the authoritarian coercion and overt brutality that once dominated the factory, the structural rules of our economy have compelled large corporations in competition for market shares to resurrect these older forms. Spurred by the perpetual push for three percent annual capitalization, corporations are reviving the factory-prison which Bentham designed more than two hundred years ago.

Jaron Browne illustrates that during the late-19th century an extensive prison system developed in the South in order to re-create, as closely as possible, the economic conditions of slavery. Angola Prison in Louisiana literally turned former slave quarters into jail cells. Following abolition, Black Codes and Convict Leasing laws allowed states to sell and lease prisoners to companies.

While the Brookings Institution finds that the number of Americans living in communities of extreme poverty, where at least 40 percent of the population is officially poor, has risen by one-third since 2000, the federal government has recently planned to cut $17 billion from public housing and at the same time committed an additional $19 billion to build new prisons. Those areas of extreme poverty are statistically likely to contribute to the growing number, disproportionately black, of incarcerated Americans. Whereas the 1980 U.S. prison population stood at one-half million, it is now five times that figure. America, which accounts for roughly four percent of the world’s population, holds 25 percent of its prisoners.

These prisoners are not just making license plates anymore. They operate call-centers for cable companies and take reservations for Trans World Airlines. The list of major corporations employing prison laborers includes IBM, Boeing, Motorola, Microsoft, AT&T, Wireless, Texas
Instrument, Dell, Compaq, Honeywell, Hewlett-Packard, Nortel, Lucent Technologies, 3Com, Intel, Northern Telecom, Nordstrom’s, Revlon, Macy’s, Target, and others. The prostitution of prisoner-laborers is now a multi-billion dollar industry in most U.S. states. According to the Wall Street Journal, 37 states currently allow corporations to pay prison laborers between one and five dollars per day, while federal prisons pay 25 cents to $1.25 per hour. Altogether, the prison-industrial complex now employs close to one million full-time, federally subsidized workers and generates $2.4 billion in annual revenue.

This New Jim Crow hurts everyone by pushing down wages. For example, a Honda plant in Ohio pays prison workers two dollars an hour for the same work that a United Auto Worker does for $20 to $30 an hour. In cahoots with state and federal lawmakers, lobbyists from the above-listed corporations have crafted legislation designed to put an increasing number of Americans behind bars whence they will provide bargain-basement wage labor. This amounts to 21st-century corporate slavery. As I point out in Chapter Four, school children are increasingly being brought into this relationship via the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

As with the prison-industrial complex, the larger American political economy robs us of our “species being.” Humans are creative, capable of imagining alternate futures and setting their productive energies toward transforming their visions into reality. But in our capitalist society all creative activity takes the form of commodity production for the purpose of generating corporate profit. In order to subsist, we sell our god-given energies to the highest bidder in exchange for a wage. We prostitute ourselves as commodities, accepting money as an equivalent for life.

**Conclusion**

“The oppressed have been destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things. In order to regain their humanity they must cease to be things and fight as men...They cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become men.”

*Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 1968*

“You are what you do. If you do boring, stupid, monotonous work, chances are you’ll end up boring, stupid, and monotonous. Work is a much better explanation for the creeping cretinization all around us than even such significant moronizing mechanisms as television and education. People who are regimented all their lives, handed to work from school...are habituated to hierarchy and psychologically enslaved. Their aptitude for autonomy is so atrophied that their fear of freedom is among their few rationally grounded phobias. Their obedience training at work carries over into the families they start...into politics, culture, and everything else.”

*Bob Black, “The Abolition of Work,” 1985*
The structure of our political economy has compelled corporations, in their own competition for survival, to employ the tools of modern science in converting the worker as far as possible into the beast of burden. According to the logic of capital, the worker is a thing whose ultimate worldly purpose is to expand capital through labor. Educational concerns, thoughts and ideas regarding what type of persons and society this mode of production creates, are ipso facto rendered null. We are forced, I believe, to consider the education of today’s workplace in the same light that we have considered the mis-education wrought by chattel slavery upon not only the African American, but the whole of Southern society.

Alongside the workplace, the school remains a primary battleground in the ongoing class war. Schooling serves a division of labor in the reproduction of our larger political economy by habituating students to the institutional structures and logics that will govern their working lives. Yet students are not the only bricks in the wall. Teachers are also workers engaged in the fight for control over the conditions and purposes of their profession. Stewards of the wisdom of our culture, they are joined with current and future generations of the working class in the struggle for emancipation.


3 See “The Science of Evil.”

4 Quoted in Taussig, 1.


8 Graeber, 68.


10 Graeber, 72.

11 Brad Rowe, “Consuming Animals as an Educational Act” [Doctoral Dissertation] (Ohio State University, 2012).


16 Graeber, 77-78.

17 Ibid., 80.


22 Muller, “Lukacs and Freyer: From the Quest for Community to the Temptations of Totality,” in The Mind and the Market, 258-287.


26 See the section titled “Taylor’s Testimony Before the Special House Committee,” in Taylor, Principles of Scientific Management.


28 Ibid., 293.

29 Bell, Work and Its Discontents, 11-14.

30 Quoted in Ibid., 24.


36 Ibid., 21.


43 Source: Mike Adams, “Americans Drowning in Prescription Drugs,” *Natural News* (September 4, 2010), http://www.naturalnews.com/029664_prescription_drugs_Americans.html. Susan Harter explains that a felt need for so many palliative drugs, in both adults and schoolchildren, may stem form the suppression of voice or “authentic self” inherent to the industrial processes of labor and study. She explains: “Why should we be concerned about lack or loss of voice?...Our studies reveal that among both adolescents and adults, those who do not receive validation for the expression of their true or authentic self engage in false self behavior, which in turn is associated with low self-esteem, hopelessness, depressed affect, and the acknowledgment that one does not even know one’s true self...[Other studies] refer to the lack of zest and related depressive symptoms that accompany the suppression of one’s authentic self. This constellation in turn limits one’s ability to achieve one’s potential, to make meaningful contributions to society, and to be productive on one’s chosen endeavor.” Susan Harter, “Teacher and Classmate Influences on Scholastic Motivation, Self-Esteem, and Level of Voice in Adolescents,” in Jaana Juvonen and Kathryn Wentzel, *Social Motivation: Understanding Children’s School Adjustment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11-42.


54 Most economists assume that a healthy capitalist economy grows at three percent, compounded annually. See David Harvey, The Enigma of Capital: and the Crises of Capitalism (Oxford University Press, 2010).


57 DeGraw, “Analysis of Financial Terrorism.”


60 Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness (New Press, 2010). According to Sheldon Wolin, the New Jim Crow is also politically motivated. Throughout the 20th century, African Americans have been the one group in our nation that has kept alive the country’s spirit of resistance and rebellion. Mass-incarceration of this population makes the nation as a whole more politically docile. See Wolin, 58.


64 Black.
CHAPTER FOUR:

THE SCHOOLS OF CAPITAL

Introduction

“We have physicists, geometricians, chemists, astronomers, poets, musicians, and painters in plenty; but we have no longer a citizen among us; or if there be found a few scattered over our abandoned countryside, they are left to perish there unnoticed and neglected.”

Jean Jacques Rousseau, 1761

“Every child born into the world should be looked upon by society as so much raw material to be manufactured. Its quality is to be tested. It is the business of society, as an intelligent economist, to make the best of it.”

Lester Frank Ward, “Education,” circa 1872

“We measure every school by one high standard: Are our children learning what they need to know to compete and win in the global economy?”

President Bill Clinton, State of the Union, 1994

“One is far more likely to hear one’s child spoken of as ‘human capital’ than as a citizen in waiting. American public schools have become, above all, a vast, variegated system funneling this human capital into its final destination in the hierarchies of the undemocratic world of modern work.”


As we so often hear from politicians, friends, and family members, the point of going to school is to get a job. Higher degrees afford us greater opportunity and make our country more competitive in the global economy. By now everyone knows this. Still, though, there are some romantic fools, often teaching in classrooms themselves, who harbor the vision that the purpose of education is not only to make students wiser and healthier human beings, but also to strengthen the democratic character of society.
In one sense, the popular wisdom is accurate. Since its earliest days, the schoolhouse has followed the factory. The link between school and work is historically tight and unseverable. Yet this relationship has frequently served something other than a public interest. Historically, American schools have largely been funded, managed, and imposed by a financial elite upon a begrudging and frequently resistant working class. For instance, wealthy industrialists imposed schooling upon former slaves in the postbellum South for the explicit purpose of reproducing, as closely as possible, the economic conditions of slavery. Subsequently, this same ethos underlay the design and management of schools throughout the continent. Over the course of our history, significant developments in the schools have followed major changes in the structure and functioning of the capitalist economy. As discontent has grown among increasing numbers of workers forced into the wage market, schools have taken up the task of quelling that unrest and adjusting the working class to its fate. Because of the prominent and consistent influence that a plutocracy has wielded over their resources and leadership, American schools as a whole have never truly been a public institution.

**Schools for Slaves**

“*The potential economic value of the Negro population properly educated is infinite and incalculable...The negro and the mule is the only combination so far to grow cotton; the South needs him; but the South needs him educated to be a suitable citizen. Properly directed he is the best possible laborer...He will willingly fill the more menial positions, and do the heavy work, at less wages, than the American white man or any foreign race which has yet come to our shores.*”

William Baldwin, Rockefeller General Education Board President, 1899

“It may be of no importance to the race to be able to boast today of many times as many ‘educated’ members as it had in 1865. If they are of the wrong kind the increase in numbers will be a disadvantage rather than an advantage. The only question which concerns us here is whether these ‘educated’ persons are actually equipped to face the ordeal before them or unconsciously contribute to their own undoing by perpetuating the regime of the oppressor.”

Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, 1933

“*[F]or the American Negro, the last decade of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th centuries were more critical than the Reconstruction years of 1868 to 1876...This was the age of triumph for big business, for industry, consolidated and organized on a world-wide scale, and run by white capital with colored labor. The Southern United States was one of the most promising fields for this development, with...a mass of cheap and potentially efficient labor.*”

The way in which William Baldwin referred to the Negro as a “citizen” in the above quotation resonates eerily with Presidents and political leaders of recent decades. None mentions civic, political, or even intellectual components. Rather citizenship appears equated to laboring for a low wage and serving the interests of an employer.

To the Southern plantation owner, the slave was a beast of burden, a not-fully-human thing. This did not change suddenly following Emancipation and the Civil War. White industrialists continued to see the African American, and all other Americans, as resources to be exploited in the pursuit of profit. However, the former-slaves’ labor power had now to be harnessed without the aid of the leg iron and lash. Instead mental shackles would have to be formed. This was the principal end to which schools in the South were designed and to which schools all over the country were eventually put.

As in the North, schools for former slaves were endowed with three principal ambitions: inculcation of the proletarian work ethic, stabilization of the social order, and material uplift of black folk. Samuel Chapman Armstrong, Union Army officer and son of missionaries to Hawaii, founded the Hampton Institute, the principal educational institution for former slaves, in Virginia in 1868. It is important to note that Armstrong, also the institute’s first principal, understood blacks to be an inferior race, unsuited for robust citizenship. Their potential contribution to society remained limited, as he saw it, to the performance of menial labor.

Thus the Hampton Institute sought to train African-Americans in subservience, political quietude, and industry.8 Mis-educated in this way, the former slaves’ labor power could be harnessed and their threat to social stability mitigated. Hampton sold and leased black men to Northern businesses as day laborers and strikebreakers. The school’s newspaper, Southern Workman, featured propaganda extolling the virtues of hard work while demonizing organized labor and black intellectualism.9 Students learned “respect for law” and “proper regard for authority.”10 They were dissuaded from voting and told that Jesus and God are white.11 “If Negroes don’t get any better education than Armstrong is giving them,” remarked William Davis, an emancipated Virginian, “they may as well have stayed in slavery.”12

Nevertheless, Armstrong’s star pupil, Booker T. Washington, shined in this environment and brought the Hampton ethos with him to the Tuskegee Institute. At the turn of the 20th century, Washington became the first African-American to visit the White House with an invitation from President Teddy Roosevelt. John Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan kept him in regular social company. By awarding Washington a guaranteed lifetime income, Andrew Carnegie laid claim to the icon that legitimized capital’s exploitation of black labor in America.13
Like his mentor, Armstrong, Washington decried the academic mission of Northern black colleges such as Howard, Fisk, and Wilberforce. He implored African Americans to mind the color line by refraining from politics and intellectualism and hoped that whites would simply leave blacks alone in their humble quietude. Thus we find Washington expounding the same peculiar notion of Negro citizenship as William Baldwin. The greatest contribution the African American could make to society, according to Washington, was economic production. As Carey McWilliams put it, Washington believed that the profit motive moved America. Within such a society, black people’s exploitability could serve as their greatest source of strength.\textsuperscript{14} African-Americans and Caucasians, he thought, would do best to maintain separate, peaceful lives and cultures, only meeting and interacting impersonally within the commercial sphere.

Surveys of Tuskegee described a militaristic and harshly disciplinarian institution. Unwarranted searches and seizures of students and their belongings constituted regular parts of daily life and official policy. Many students rebelled, going so far as to call Washington a “slave-master.” W.T.B. Williams, with the General Board of Education, found that numbers of students could hardly read or write.\textsuperscript{15} Perhaps exactly for this reason, both Northern and Southern industrialists deeply appreciated the Tuskegee students. As white Southern spokesman William Trent mentioned in regard to black students, “a little learning is a dangerous thing.”\textsuperscript{16}

By the late-19\textsuperscript{th} century, American industry, North and South, was swimming in excess capital and looking for new sources of labor to exploit. A host of wealthy tycoons and magnates, including Rockefeller, Carnegie, and George Peabody, found Tuskegee to be an indispensable source of docile, compliant, and zealous workers unlikely to strike or unionize.\textsuperscript{17} Together with organizations such as the Southern Improvement Company, these men poured vast sums of money into building up a Southern educational infrastructure according to the Hampton and Tuskegee models.\textsuperscript{18}

These same logics and rationales drove the creation and reform of schools in the North. In most cases, wealthy industrialists supported, funded, and directed the institutionalization of compulsory education. Naturally, members of the working class saw merit in schools. However, they resented the fact that they could exercise little if any control or oversight. Many schools’ organization and leadership remained far from democratic. Neither teachers, nor students, nor community members had substantial say regarding their daily operations or ultimate purposes.

Du Bois understood that Hampton, Tuskegee, and Booker Washington served the larger capitalist economy by treating both students and teachers as objects to be exploited. No people, Du Bois argued, could achieve their full potential by accepting the social role of economic resource. Democratic citizenship could not be reconciled with bald commercialism. Not just blacks, but all colors and nationalities of people, needed “the broader, deeper, higher culture of gifted minds and
pure hearts,” he wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). “[E]lse what shall save us from a second slavery?”

“**The Educational Frontier**”

“Democratic despotism...orderly, gentle, peaceful slavery...does not break men’s will, but softens, bends, and guides it; it seldom enjoins, but often inhibits, action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents much from being born; it is not at all tyrannical but it hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and stultifies. I do not expect their leaders to by tyrants, but rather schoolmasters.”

*Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 1831*

“The people have the power, and if they are not instructed to sympathize with the intelligent, reading, trading, and governing class, inspired with a taste for the same competitions and prizes, they will upset the fair pageant of Judicature, and perhaps lay a hand on the sacred muniments of wealth itself, and new distribute the land.”

*Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Conservative,” 1841*

Evidence exists to support the notion of an honest, perhaps even noble, impetus for the modern school. Having broken free from the encrusted and suffocating structures of feudalism, immigrants to the New World faced an open and uncertain life. Could people emancipated from traditional culture govern themselves intelligently? Or would chaos prevail? The standard liberal justification for the modern school is that traditional institutions—family, community, church, &c.—could no longer prepare young people to become fully competent members of society. Some sort of explicit institution would be needed to inculcate into each subsequent generation the rules, habits, and customs appropriate to democratic, or republican, living. Founders of this country, steeped in the intellectual tradition of the Western Enlightenment, conceived the modern school as the best solution to meet this challenge.

This liberal rationalization bespeaks a profound understanding of the social and political conditions facing late-18th and early-19th century America. However, it also misses what I take to be the central shaping force of modernity: the imperatives of “free-market” capitalism. The Common School is best understood as a political and intellectual cousin to the Hampton and Tuskegee schools. Rather than public and democratic control over many Common Schools we find domination by a ruling class combined with begrudging working-class acceptance of schooling as a least-worst alternative. Subsequent reforms shaped schools to the needs of capital, namely by adjusting a disgruntled and growing class of wage-workers to the miseries and mythologies of the capitalist political economy. Following the First American Republic, Progressive Era reforms quelled the rising militancy of a growing wage-labor class. Hence the early-20th century became the age of the
educational frontier, where capitalist ideology cast the school as proving grounds of the meritocracy and avenue to the American Dream.

Throughout the First Republic, Americans entertained competing visions of the Common School, namely two different conceptions of what they wanted education to be and do for them. First and foremost, wealthy industrialists appreciated the schools’ inculcation of bourgeois-liberal ideology, by which I mean a constellation of attitudes, understandings, and habits of mind conducive to the smooth functioning of the capitalist political economy. During the Middle Ages, poor peasants could understand severe inequality as an inevitable component of the Great Chain of Being, God’s divine plan. But in a modern world lacking such a cosmology, a secular mythology would be required to defend the aristocrat’s hoarded riches from the masses. By the mid-19th century, the American ruling class discovered that mass compulsory schooling could effectively invest students with a sense of naturalness and properness regarding the uneven distribution of wealth, lifestyle, and political power. In other words, schooling habituated the children of the working class to the rules, roles, and structures of capitalism. Thomas Cooper stated the same in his Lectures on the Elements of Political Economy (1826):

> Education universally extended throughout the community will tend to disabuse the working class of people in respect of a notion that has crept into the minds of our mechanics and is gradually prevailing, that manual labor is at present very inadequately rewarded, owing to combinations of the rich against the poor; that mere mental labor is comparatively worthless; that property or wealth ought not be accumulated or transmitted; that to take interest on money lent or profit on capital employed is unjust…The mistaken and ignorant people who entertain these fallacies as truths will learn, when they have the opportunity of learning, that the institution of political society originated in the protection of property.23

Whiggish liberals such as Cooper had no use for notions of class warfare and sought explicitly to stamp them out from the minds of working-class children.

In The Literacy Myth (1979), Ohio State University professor Harvey Graff explains that the extension of literacy to the public, through the schools, as a means of personal uplift and empowerment, is an apocryphal, although common, conception. Despite their support and endowment of schools, members of the ruling class feared literacy as a potentially subversive tool. Yet it was necessary for the large-scale extension of a moral economy of discipline, docility, and private ambition.24 Graff writes that,

> In North America, education could replace the coercion of English labor to strict factory rules and internalized self-discipline. In the long run, education was more effective and efficient than overt coercion; certainly, it was less disruptive. The provision of mass schooling; the working class’ acceptance of it, though a questioning one; and universal, public education all served this direction: promoting discipline, morality, and the ‘training in being trained’ that mattered most in the creation and preparation of a modern industrial and urban work force. These were the purposes of the school—and one use of literacy.25
Essentially, schooling made for the efficient adjustment of traditional and peasant peoples to proletarian wage enslavement.

Addressing the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1842, Horace Mann quoted local industrialist, H. Bartlett: “The great majority always have been and probably always will be comparatively poor, while a few will possess the greatest share of this world’s goods.” Speaking to a wealthy audience in 1844, Mann spoke plainly of schools as purveyors of ruling-class hegemony:

Finally, in regard to those who possess the largest shares in the stock of worldly goods, could there, in your opinion, be any police so vigilant and effective, for the protection of all the rights of person, property and character, as such a sound and comprehensive education and training as our system of common schools could be made to impart…Would not the payment of a sufficient tax to make such training universal, be the cheapest means of self-protection and insurance?

Such overtures contrasted sharply with Mann’s appeals to Massachusetts’s working class.

In the second vision of the Common School, members of the working class remained divided in their support. Many resisted schooling as an imposition upon their way of life and regarded the schools’ ruling-class purveyors more as invading conquerors than members of their communities. Others appreciated schools’ effect of thinning out the labor pool—by removing children from the workforce—and driving up wages. Many placed their hopes in Mann’s rhetoric of social advancement through education.

The first half of the 19th century saw a widespread and unprecedented shift from small proprietorship to wage-work, particularly in Northeastern industrial towns. The Common School shift in social relations of reproduction, from mixed-age to age-graded groupings, mirrored the concomitant shift in relations of material production from the home and independent shop to the factory. That is, the social relations of schooling came to mirror less the home and more the corporation. As large-scale factories pushed small businesses out of the marketplace, folks were left with few choices but to enlist as wage slaves. Within this new economic structure, schooling appeared to the working class as the last viable means of uplift.

According to the socio-economic cosmology of antebellum America, wagedom constituted a temporary stage to be endured and surpassed on the road to economic independence. Perhaps this is what Horace Mann believed. On his tours throughout New England, he preached a rhetoric of upward mobility to the working class. The school, he told them, would prevent the hardening of class lines as well as “the domination of capital and the servility of labor.” Most famously, in his Twelfth Annual Report to the Massachusetts School Board, he stated that “Education…beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery.”

By working hard and proving their merit in school, individuals could escape wagedom
and join the owning class. This hope proved a savory tonic for the dispossessed people of New England who lacked alternative paths to redemption.

The mercurial Horace Mann sold the Common School to both the ruling and working classes: for the latter as an institution of social uplift and for the former to secure private property and promote social stability by quelling inter-class hostility. Most historians agree that Mann was a conservative in the traditional sense, wanting to preserve the social structure in which he had grown up and believing in the Common School as a force for stability. Yet there are two ways in which we are forced, I believe, to conclude that Mann’s overtures to the working class were disingenuous.

First, belief in social mobility as a legitimate possibility for most Americans was already becoming untenable in his time. Increasing numbers of farmers and shopkeepers were being driven into the factories, never to return. Mann must have observed this. Second, and most glaringly, he had to know that the capitalist class could ultimately control and shape many schools where they so chose. Few workers were wealthy or politically powerful enough to exert much influence over the aims and contents of schooling. During its first three decades, 85 percent of Lowell, Massachusetts school board members hailed from the business and professional class; less than five percent represented the working class. Thus it requires a tremendous acrobatics of mind to believe that Mann truly expected the Common School to promote social and economic democracy.

Although farmers and immigrants did not oppose schooling in principle, they wanted the self-determination to control the education of their own children. In Beverly, Massachusetts, in the year 1860, more than three-quarters of the town’s working population voted against establishing a school. These were once-independent shoemakers who had been forced out of the marketplace by and into large textile factories. The transition from independent proprietorship to proletarian wage-slavery wrought devastating effects on the quality of their lives, robbing them of control over the daily rhythms of work. They sought to protect their children from an institution which they understood to be aligned with the designs of their employing masters.

When Irish immigrants of Lowell boycotted the schools, the State hired truant officers to forcibly bring children in and arrest recalcitrant parents. Similar developments repeated across the state. Populist revolts slowed down the establishment of schools in Minnesota, Nebraska, Kansas, Alabama, North Carolina, and the Dakotas; but resistance inevitably gave way. In areas of the country where wage labor had not yet taken hold, few saw reasons for building schools. Yet wherever factories grew up and men and women entered the ranks of wagedom, schools soon followed.

Writing from the Regina Coeli prison in Rome during the 1920’s, Antonio Gramsci argued that no regime, no matter how authoritarian, could long sustain itself through overt coercion and violence. It is necessary, he believed, that popular support and legitimacy be contained in a system of
values, attitudes, and beliefs that pervades society as a natural order. Nothing about schools implicates them as necessarily coercive. Yet, as a State institution, the school may become just as coercive as judicial, police, or military forces.

During the Progressive Era, as corporate capitalism eclipsed the older, small-scale competitive economy, professional administrators and businessmen liquidated nearly all that remained of working-class representation on urban school boards. In reaction to growing populist revolt against the swelling prevalence of wage work and the increasingly clear rigidity of class divisions, Progressive school reforms sought again to reduce social tension by adjusting the proletariat to its fate. Here the mission of the school grew in scope and magnitude to become an indispensable and permanent institutional division of labor within the larger political economy. Responding to massive labor strikes across the country, capitalists restored order by calling in strikebreakers, Pinkerton thugs, and the National Guard to beat, shoot, and murder workers. But industrialists such as Carnegie believed that the true solution to the unrest lie in “education, education, education.”

At the time of the American Revolution, 80 percent of non-slave adult males remained independent property owners and proprietors. That number fell to 33 percent by 1880. Prior to the turn of the 20th century it had become apparent that wagedom was a lasting and even permanent condition for most Americans. From that point on, very few ever graduated to the ranks of independent proprietorship. Men and women had to accept competing against each other within corporations rather than competing against the corporations themselves. Once again, school appeared to the working class as the most viable means for improving one’s competitive chances. During the Progressive Era intellectual leaders of the American educational establishment would exploit this myth in the service of the ruling class.

During WWI, Randy Bourne attacked an American intellectual class that he saw serving as courtiers to the State and its “significant classes.” Just as they had loyally offered up high-minded rationales for entering the war, Bourne’s colleagues began to jump on board the State’s rolling train of “social efficiency.” This educational movement conceived the schools as instruments for fitting students to their “proper” places in industry. Decisions regarding the aims of education were to be handled by experts and under no circumstances left up to regular folk, all purportedly in the interest of the greater social good. “Social efficiency” found its ideological architecture in Herbert Spencer’s Social Darwinism. In Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical (1860), the country’s most widely read educational treatise by the end of the century, Spencer argued that schools should educate boys and girls according to their innate, racially and ethnically-determined intellectual capacities in order to direct them to the appropriate jobs required by industry. Two decades later, Lester Frank Ward
rejected Spencer’s Social Darwinism but agreed that the proper function of schools was to identify students’ mental capacities in order to conduct them to commensurate vocations.39

By the first decade of the 20th century, Edward Thorndike, David Snedden, and the budding discipline of Educational Psychology had steered the academic mind, along with the bulk of educational research funding, toward the task of social engineering in the name of progress. In 1906 the Massachusetts Commission on Industrial and Technical Education launched a movement to prepare students for “productive efficiency” in jobs.40 12 years later, the National Education Association published a report titled “Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education,” in which it dismissed the general study of History as useless and defined “good citizenship” as the adjustment of student attitudes to prevailing social conditions. The same report urged high schools to steer girls away from academic subjects in favor of preparation for a lifetime of bondage to household chores.41

Corporate employers have long utilized the strategy of divide and conquer to ensure that their employees compete against each other as individuals rather than unite together to challenge the corporation itself. Not only ranks and pay grades, but also race, gender, religion, and class background have served and continue to serve as the lines of division. During the Progressive Era, mental testing and educational credentials became accepted as objective criteria by which schools and businesses could arrange and separate their charges into ever-more-narrowly-defined roles and positions within their hierarchies. America’s industrial institutions, including the school, would begin to appear more and more like the Army in their organizational structure. The differential rewarding of status, authority, and pay would help to naturalize within the working class its own internal divisions.

Intelligence tests developed by Thorndike, Snedden, and Lewis Terman shrouded racism, sexism, and sinister corporate strategy in the cloak of scientific authority. Between 1921-1936, academic journals published over 4000 articles on mental testing. By 1939, 4300 mental tests were in use in American schools.42 The Carnegie Corporation gave Thorndike $325 million to develop intelligence tests and categories and in 1948 teamed with Rockefeller to create the now-predominant Educational Testing Service, whose tests today perpetuate and proliferate the same malign divisions and discriminations.

After the American Frontier closed at the turn of the century, education became the new path to the American Dream of personal advancement. Race, work ethic, and Intelligence Quotient were held to be the determining factors of deserved success and rightful inequity. Having been forced out of the marketplace as independent proprietors, average folk now looked upon school as the primary means to prove their merit and earn favored position within the corporate world.

Following WWI, Upton Sinclair spent two years touring the country’s urban schools. In each city he found a ruling power structure, what he called the Black Hand, dictating the aims and contents
of classrooms, using the schools to further its own designs. Teachers, students, and workers of the nation, Sinclair concluded, share a bond and common interest: emancipation from serfdom and the assertion of democratic self-governance.

**Making the World Safe for Plutocracy**

“I want it clearly understood that neither the pupils nor the teachers will be allowed to run the schools.”

*John Whalen, New York City School Board Member, 1917*

“I do not know any school system in the United States which is run for the benefit of the children. They are all run for the benefit of the gang.”

*John Tildsey, New York City Schools Superintendent, 1922*

“In the wave of repressive terror which had swept the country after the war, no group had suffered more than the educators. From the highest-salaried professor in the richest university down to the poorest paid teacher in the smallest country school, all were under governing boards made up of businessmen determined to see that no teacher should suggest any social change that might threaten profits.”

*Mary Craig Sinclair, Southern Belle, 1957*

Upton Sinclair’s 1924 publication, *The Goslings*, recounts “The Funeral of Democracy” that he witnessed in America’s urban schools. Curiously, Sinclair began the book with a lengthy account of the San Pedro strike of 1923, when the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the United Maritime Workers shut down one of the country’s largest shipping ports. The post-WWI years witnessed the effective *coup de grace* of militant organized labor in America that had fought for the democratization of industry and the end of the wage system. Capital accumulation and wealth inequality increased precipitously following the war. Seeking sources of cheap labor in which to invest surplus capital, the plutocracy cracked down on organized labor by blacklistng any shops that hired union workers, publishing anti-union propaganda in the “kept press,” hiring Pinkerton thugs to sabotage organizers, constructing prisons for “criminal syndicalists,” and bribing judges to fill them. Sinclair writes that in his hometown of Southern California union organizers were regularly sentenced to decades in prison under the slightest pretense, where they received regular beatings and torture.

The longshoremen leading the San Pedro strike clamored to work 14 to 16-hour days for subsistence pay. In the hopes of winning enough bread to feed their children, they struck against the bankers, owners, and financiers whose riches they had toiled to produce. Their strike was crushed
when police arrested 600 demonstrators. Sinclair himself went to jail for the crime of reading the Bill of Rights to the remaining crowd. He began his book on schools with this story because the cabal that smashed the San Pedro strike was the same that broke the teacher’s councils and ran the schools for its own profit. 48

There are two ways, Sinclair found, in which the plutocracy exploits education: first through graft and second by breeding ruling-class ideology into the working class. The American capitalist class, what Sinclair named “The Black Hand,” sees in education a tremendous opportunity to lay its hands on public money. In the quest for profit, no life function is absorbed from exploitation.

Sinclair witnessed real estate speculators bribe board members to build state of the art schools on their properties to draw in wealthy parents and raise market values. Meanwhile, slum schools were left in perpetual states of disrepair. Many poor children had no schools at all and were forbidden by law from travelling to attend those of the rich. 49 The Black Hand offered lucrative textbook publishing contracts to its political allies and handed over teachers’ pensions to their banking friends in exchange for political support. 50 “It would be no exaggeration to say,” Sinclair wrote of Southern California Superintendent Dorsey, “that she has handed [the schools] over to the bankers to be used as a collection agency to get the children’s money.” 51 Recalcitrant administrators and board members found their names libeled in the press while Pinkerton detectives threatened their families’ lives.

The Black Hand’s primary aim, Sinclair argued, was to use the schools to enslave children to capitalist ideology. At their behest, Superintendent Dorsey declared that all district schools would celebrate “Chamber of Commerce Week,” during which students would learn and write about the many ways in which the organization benefitted their city. The school board voted down concomitant proposals to celebrate “Civil Liberties Week” and “Union Labor Week.” 52 Representatives of the banking, agriculture, and big oil industries all enjoyed opportunities to write textbooks and lesson plans for school children across the nation. These lessons spoke of the virtues of strike-breaking and suggested that pecuniary self-seeking is the only principle upon which civilization can survive.

Banishing The Nation and The New Republic from school libraries, this same school board allowed the Better America Foundation (BAF) to place the textbook, Vanishing Landmarks, authored by former U.S. Secretary of Treasury, Leslie Shaw, into every classroom. Vanishing Landmarks told students that “only socialists, near socialists, and Bolsheviks clamor for democracy.” 53 Back to the Republic, written by Harry Atwood, told students that “Promiscuity, or free-love, is to the domestic world what democracy is to government…what gluttony is to the individual, democracy is to government…what discord is to music, democracy is to government…what insanity is to thought, democracy is to government.” 54 Teachers were expected to compel children to recite these passages and commit them to heart. Harry Haldeman, then president of the BAF, proudly reported that he had
hired spies to monitor and ensure teacher compliance. Any teacher discovered expounding ideas heretical in relation to capital would find themselves charged with “Bolshevism” in the *LA Times* and be promptly fired.55

In addition to instituting merit-pay systems and regularly shortchanging teachers in pay, city school boards crafted policies forbidding teachers from congregating away from the presence of administrators. New York City schoolteacher, Henrietta Rodman, reacted to the measure:

One might think, if we are fit to teach the children in the schools, we are fit to meet and discuss our own problems and ideas. But, no! Here are a million children and twenty-five thousand teachers, and all the thinking for the whole system is to be done by twenty-two men. If anybody else presumes to think, that is impertinence.56

Asked why, if she were so unhappy with her job, she did not just quit, Rodman responded: “I stay because I am not willing to leave the children to Dr. Tildsey. I have enlisted as if for a war. I am furiously patriotic; I believe in the future of America with all my heart and soul, and I am going to make freedom a reality here. I am going to stick to the death.”57

Sinclair described teachers as the least corrupt members of the school system, but believed that any who really tried to help students deal with the world by educating them about the savage realities of the class struggle “would cease to be teacher[s].”58 Even the National Education Association (NEA), ostensibly an organization of professional educators, belonged to the Black Hand. United with the U.S. Bureau of Education, the Rockefeller General Education Board, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the NEA defined the aims of education by disseminating standardized curricula through state and county school machines. At few points did teachers exercise control over the process.59

The Black Hand knew that truly public schools, designed and operated directly by teachers, parents, students, and communities, would pose grave threat to their rule. And so, under the banner of benevolence, they employed whatever means of coercion and violence necessary to prevent this from happening. The only viable alternative to perpetual wage slavery, Sinclair argued, is solidarity and organization amongst the working class. He writes:

In this present world situation [the capitalists] find themselves confronted with two possible alternatives—world conquest and class rule for themselves, or abdication and class suicide. In no country are they going to choose the latter alternative; so you, the educators under the capitalist regime, are going to fulfill your destiny as cultivators of cannon-fodder…More and more the outlines of the world struggle become clear—on the one side the plutocracy, and on the other the workers. It is the workers, and they alone, who can deliver us from slaughter; they alone have the numbers, the potential power, and they alone have the ethics—being producers, not gamblers and speculators and wasters. The future world of co-operation and brotherhood is theirs to make, and all they lack is ripened understanding and vision of the better life…When I appeal to educators, I am not indulging in useful utopianism; the salary struggles of the past six or eight years have brought vividly home to the rank and file of teachers the fact that they too are workers, and that, far from being superior to the proletariat,
they are actually less paid and less respected than carpenters and masons and machinists, who are organized and able to protect themselves in the wage market. I am not for a moment overlooking the fact that educators are idealists and social ministerants; but I assert that they are also members of the intellectual proletariat, having nothing but their brain power to sell, and I appeal to them to realize their status, and to act upon the realities and not the fairy tales of the capitalist world. The educator is a worker, a useful worker, and the educator’s place is by the side of all his brothers of that class.

Every day educators and working people risk their careers and livelihoods in opposing the plutocracy, Sinclair recognized. Conditions would be much worse if they did not. Yet, he thought that the public still required a broader and more sophisticated understanding of the nature of its enemy. Clearly, Sinclair hoped that teachers would join and lead in the class struggle for emancipation. And he hoped that his books would help in some way. After reading The Goose Step (1922), Sinclair’s muckraking account of American higher education, M.C. Bettinger, a veteran schoolteacher, wrote to the author saying, “I know now what I have been trying to do, and what has been done to me.”

Sinclair made similar findings in school systems across the nation. Corruption and the strategies and tactics of class warfare obtained wherever big business was to be found. This same essential situation remains almost a century later. Our public schools have struggled to live up to their name. For the past century, Dewey’s democratic educational aims have remained sadly hampered by the larger, undemocratic political economy.

A Battle for Hearts and Minds

“A general state education is a mere contrivance for molding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mold in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government…it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body…An education established and controlled by the state should only exist if it exists at all, as one among many competing experiments.”

John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, 1859

 “[T]he ‘invisible government’ of big business which controls the rest of America has taken over the charge of your children…Our educational system is not a public service, but an instrument of special privilege; its purpose is not to further the welfare of mankind, but merely to keep America capitalist.”

Upton Sinclair, The Goose Step, 1922

“Many young people among the ninety-nine percent, in my experience, have been socialized not to have ‘class consciousness.’ The one percent and the corporate media have succeeded in making the terms ‘class consciousness’ and ‘class war’ taboo, which is part of the reason why they are winning the class war and enslaving the ninety-nine percent.”
Following a Depression-Era fracturing of relations, and fearing socialization of the economy, big business charged back into America’s schools to compete for the hearts and minds of the youth. Floods of corporate money and propaganda pressed the indoctrination of students into the ideologies and mythologies of capitalist society. Later on, the Cold War Era would compel the government arm of the State to initiate a much stronger role in education. Here, rather than a democratic socialization of the institution, the schools shifted toward a Soviet-style, direct-command apparatus led by captains and puppets of industry. The State’s military-industrial complex drew schools more fully into its service.

After WWII, big business began soliciting teacher needs and offering financial support for underfunded schools. All they asked for in return was the opportunity to instantiate their messages into classrooms. Teachers’ unions resisted and spoke out against these attempts. Meanwhile, George Counts and John Dewey called for a push away from competitive individualism toward a more collective orientation in schools. In response, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) began to issue studies claiming that communists were infiltrating the schools and charged Counts and Dewey with disloyalty and sedition. A host of business-sponsored organizations joined the assault. The National Economic Council, for example, distributed one million pamphlets titled “Treason in the Textbooks,” which depicted devious teachers shutting students’ eyes to “The American Way of Life.”

Studies conducted during the 1940’s suggesting that Americans took a favorable attitude toward labor unions and progressive taxation frightened the capitalist class, which reacted with a reciprocal strategy of fear. “Confident in the power of advertising,” writes Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, “business leaders suggested selling the notion of a crisis in education to arouse public interest.” Pouring millions into the campaign, they succeeded in generating mistrust in the schools. In conjunction, businesses invited students into their plants for field trips, where they would learn the wonders of the “free enterprise” system. The NAM flooded schools with comic books, movies, and teaching aids warning against the dangers of collectivism. By 1954, 3.5 million students had watched 60 thousand NAM films.

Organized labor attempted to combat this offensive with its own educational programs and materials. Unionists in Akron, Ohio had removed from their children’s schools a textbook that devoted whole chapters to Quaker Oats and the rubber industry but ignored unions. However, organized labor could not ultimately match big business’s financial resources and by the 1950’s had ceded the territory of the schools. Students became, as Economics professor Daniel Fusfeld put it,
“captives of the ideology of the right,” indoctrinated into the ethic of competitive individualism.\textsuperscript{70} Consulting History curricula and textbooks, this remains the case today.

In his critique of the American History textbook industry, \textit{Lies My Teacher Told Me} (1995), James Loewen writes that the vast majority of History textbooks used in American classrooms are products of the editorial work performed by an ultra-right-wing adoption board in the state of Texas. Because it is the largest market, publishing companies must win approval in Texas for books that will be sold around the country. This board requires that “textbooks shall not contain material which serves to undermine authority.”\textsuperscript{71} According to one author, analysis of “social class” earns books the heretical label of “Marxist.” Loewen’s research finds that almost no history textbook mentions the facts of wealth inequality, much less gives these facts analysis. Instead, they speak of America as “The Land of Opportunity” and “The Land of Promise.” Mentions of “Social Mobility” refer to comparisons between England and the early American colonies. From that point on, the books assert, mobility and opportunity have spread to anyone willing to work for it. No major textbook pays attention to the labor movement or the class struggle in American history.\textsuperscript{72}

During the 1960’s an ETS study found that 85 percent of college-bound students took the majority of their social studies readings from a single textbook.\textsuperscript{73} Loewen cites a national survey conducted 30 years later reporting that teachers use textbooks more than 70 percent of the time.\textsuperscript{74} The result of a knowledge industry whose primary motivation is to turn a profit, combined with the influence of a tiny cabal of hard-line politicians, is a nation of students not only disinterested in their country’s history, but woefully misinformed regarding the class struggle into which they are born.

Following labor’s mid-century surrender of the curriculum to capital, American education would undergo a socialization of sort, yet one ultimately conducive to the aims of capital. Talk of “crisis in education” again ensued after the Soviet Union’s 1957 launching of the small satellite, Sputnik. America was not training enough scientists and engineers to win the space race.

Despite its ultimately fatal flaws, the Soviet education system was a marvel of modern social technology. Upon the October Revolution of 1917, Russia remained a largely feudal landmass of 225 million people, composed of 600 distinct nationalities, each with its own language, customs, and culture. Newspapers were printed in 65 different tongues, many of which used different scripts. Most languages had no written form at all and the overall literacy rate stood below 30 percent.\textsuperscript{75} In order to transform this motley assemblage into a modern industrial superpower, the Soviet State gave education top priority, bringing schools into every town and village. The country’s literacy rate soared to 81 percent by 1939 and by 1960 it was universal.\textsuperscript{76}
On a theoretical level, Counts and Dewey had held the Soviet school system in high esteem. It seemed to be opening for the Russian youth new fields of opportunity and to “release,” as Dewey wrote, “human powers on such an unprecedented scale that it is of incalculable significance not only for that country, but for the world.” Yet after travelling to Russia, visiting its schools and seeing them in operation, Dewey drastically revised his estimation. In order to achieve such tremendous feats, the Soviet schools had to operate hierarchically, controlled tightly from top to bottom. High-level pedagogical institutes disseminated uniform curricula and methodologies to each classroom, where principals acted as police officers, strictly monitoring and enforcing teacher compliance. This conferred upon the schools a militaristic atmosphere and alienated many teachers and students in the process. “The tide of totalitarianism is rising throughout the world,” Dewey reflected:

It is washing away cultural and creative freedom along with all other expressions of independent human reason… There intellectual and creative independence is suppressed and punished as a form of treason. Art, science, and education have been forcibly turned into lackeys for a supreme state, a deified leader, and an official pseudo-philosophy.

Sobering as it was, the Soviet school system remained meticulously faithful to the science of modern industry. Its accomplishments made within a single generation duly inspire awe. Paul Nitze, a member of the U.S. National Security Council during the 1940’s and 50’s, concluded that the only way for America to compete with the Soviets in the arms race would be to adopt their economic organization. In other words, American schools had to make concerted efforts to produce scientists and engineers to fuel the growth of the armaments industry, and to more fully realize their potential as institutional divisions of labor within the State-capitalist economy.

While Russians labored under the ruling hand of the Soviet State, Americans toiled under the auspices of despotic corporations increasingly aligned with executive arms of government. The 1957 National Defense Education Act (NDEA) enlisted schools as functional units of the military-industrial complex by providing funding tied to intensified study of science and technology. This Act of Congress marks a decided and precipitous bearing toward a Soviet-style, militarized educational infrastructure. In the context of the Cold War, the NDEA provided capital with a source of skilled labor in which to invest and from which to profit. Ever since, this engine has run at full steam. Along with revenues, let us measure what types of persons and what sort of world this organization has created.

Of course industry has use for only so many intellectual laborers. To borrow a line from Judge Smails in Caddy Shack (1980), “The world needs ditch diggers.” Although our education system faithfully reproduces the diversity of lifestyles characteristic of our class structure, it encumbers the teacher’s task of encouraging students to become autonomous, ethical, and democratic human persons.
Revolving Doors and Dirty Pipelines

“The clash of cultures in the classroom is essentially a class war, a socio-economic and racial warfare being waged on the battleground of the schools…this is an uneven balance, particularly since, like most battles, it comes under the guise of righteousness.”

Kenneth Clark, Dark Ghetto, 1965

“[S]chools have evolved in the United States not as a pursuit of equality, but rather to meet the needs of capitalist employers for a disciplined and skilled labor force, and to provide a mechanism for social control in the interests of political stability. Although the unequal distribution of political power serves to maintain inequalities in education, the origins of these inequalities are to be found outside the political sphere, in the class structure itself and in the class subcultures typical of capitalist societies. Thus, unequal education has its roots in the very class structure which it serves to legitimize and reproduce. Inequalities in education are part of the web of capitalist society, and are likely to persist as long as capitalism survives.”


In our country’s educational system the capitalist class now walks through a revolving door between high positions in private and government offices. Meanwhile a vastly-increasing number of our poorest students, from the ages of five and six, are sent down the school-to-prison pipeline. Just as they did a century ago, today’s plutocrats lay claim to many of our schools, making decisions as to how they will function, what will be taught, and which aims will be pursued. Schools dominated by the logic of capital can treat students as little more than beasts of burden, resources to be exploited for the purpose of capital growth and accumulation. The reproduction of a stratified economic class structure and the constitution of persons suited to its roles stands firmly against the goal of educating democratic citizens.

Writing in Dissent magazine, Joanne Barkan describes a contemporary plutocratic assault on schools strikingly similar to Sinclair’s time. A multi-billionaire triumvirate of capitalists, including Bill Gates, the Walton family, and Eli Broad, is the tail that wags the dog of American education. Through their foundations this tiny cabal of plunderers, our contemporary Black Hand, has strategically pushed privatization, choice, accountability, competition, deregulation, merit pay, and high-stakes testing down the throats of our nation’s teachers and students. Through their ownership of national media, they have shaped public dialogue and sold their designs to the American people. Far from improving education, their programs have tyrannized our most promising teachers and terrorized a generation of the doomed.
Public schooling is a half-trillion dollar annual venture in America. As of 2010, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, backed by a matching donation from Warren Buffet, boasted a $63 billion endowment. Together with the multi-billion dollar endowments of the Eli & Edy Broad Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, Gates directs public policy and shapes the composition of the educational workforce. For instance, at the Broad Superintendents Academy, pliable business and legal executives are recruited and trained to implement the Foundation’s agenda into urban school districts. In 2009, with the help of Broad’s supple political and financial connections, the academy’s graduates filled a stunning 43 percent of all open superintendencies across the nation. As an example of what the new Black Hand has in store, we can look to the Chicago Public Schools’ Renaissance2010 project, also known as Ren2010.

In 1995 the Gates Foundation gave Chicago Public Schools Chief Executive Officer Arne Duncan $90 million to turn the failing institution around. Duncan had been installed with the help of the Commercial Club of Chicago (CCC), an organization of the city’s top corporate, financial, and political elites. Along with the money, Gates gave Duncan a how-to manual titled The Turnaround Challenge, which professed a path toward raising educational achievement through choice, accountability, high-stakes testing, and privatization. According to Chicago residents, Ren2010 put tremendous pressure on schools to achieve academic goals for which they lacked the necessary resources. School failure, with the legal consequence of privatization, was assured from the start. Under the benevolent guise of “saving the children,” the process of constituting young human beings was wrested from public purview and handed over to the forces of the market.

University of Illinois at Chicago professor Pauline Lipman writes that Ren2010 constituted only one division of a larger plan to convert the city into a more efficient engine of capital growth. For 25 years, Chicago’s working-class residents had been foreclosed upon and forced out of the city in order to make room for upscale residential and commercial space. This process of gentrification began, according to Chicago resident and investment banking heir Karl Muth, by building police stations in poor neighborhoods, tearing out their basketball courts, and then closing down the public schools. The now-privatized schools existing on the margins of this gentrified space are currently training the children of the poor and working class in the skills and attitudes appropriate to this space’s low-paying service sector jobs. Effectively, the Gates Foundation, the CCC, and Arne Duncan have created a network of collection bins for Chicago’s economic refuse to be recycled into useful, low-wage servants of capital.

Promptly after President Barack Obama nominated him as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, Duncan created the position of Director of Philanthropic Engagement, making private foundation partnerships the hallmark of his DOE stewardship. “[T]he Department is ‘open for
business,” he announced in an October, 2009 issue of the DOE newsletter, The Education Innovator. But Duncan is by no means the lone Black Hand affiliate occupying top positions in the DOE. Margot Rogers, Duncan’s first chief of staff, worked for Gates, as did her replacement, Joanne Weiss. Russlynn Ali, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, is a former employee of both Broad and Gates. General Counsel Charles Rose and Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement James Shelton both worked for Gates. Even Larry Summers, former Treasury Secretary and President of Harvard University, sat on the Broad Foundation’s board of directors. Collectively, this team designed the Obama administration’s Race to the Top program according to the philosophy of Gates’s Turnaround Challenge, which Duncan hails as “the bible” of school restructuring.

It is impossible to separate government from corporate entities in the realm of American schooling. On the cover of its December, 2008 issue, Time magazine featured Michelle Rhee, then Chancellor of Washington, D.C. Schools, standing in a classroom holding a broom. Behind her was written in big bold letters: “How To Fix America’s Schools.” Rhee attempted to implement in the nation’s capital a $63-million Gates-funded strategy of high-stakes testing, accountability, and school closing, earning her the ire of teachers’ unions across the country. Although there is little evidence for educational improvement, investigations have uncovered massive patterns of teachers cheating on standardized tests: erasing wrong answers and filling in correct ones, ostensibly in desperate efforts to keep their jobs so that they might continue to earn paychecks and feed their families. Poverty rates are staggering in Washington, D.C. and paying jobs are tough to come by. Yet public support for these misbegotten school reform initiatives remains strong.

Media propaganda such as the Time magazine cover work effectively at convincing audiences of their message. Rhee, in an uncomplicated and empowering image, is fixing the crisis in education by sweeping away the garbage, the stupid and lazy teachers. In addition to national educational organizations, The Black Hand contributes millions to major news and media outlets, sponsoring in 2010 NBC’s “Education Nation” as well as the renowned propaganda film, Waiting for Superman. Both programs painted pictures of crisis in education and Gates-style reform as the sure-fire solution. Frederick Hess reports in his book, With the Best of Intentions (2005), that the national press handles the Black Hand’s educational foundations with kid gloves: the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, Newsweek, and Associated Press each publish 13 positive for every one critical article.

In addition to the major educational foundations, Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, Exxon, and Hershey offer funding to cash-strapped schools. But the money does not come unattached. In exchange, schools must conduct lessons provided by the Hershey Corporation about the importance of chocolate in a balanced diet. Teachers in business classes instruct students in how to apply for and
manage a McDonald’s franchise. McDonald’s-sponsored physical education programs conducted in 31 thousand schools nationwide instantiate brand loyalty into developing citizen-consumers. Elsewhere, teachers conduct an environmental curriculum from Shell Oil extolling the virtues of the external combustion engine.91

Students of America’s underfunded schools make easy prey for the Black Hand in the same way that impoverished boys and girls of the world make easy prey for sex traffickers. The moneyed interests in this relationship know that their beneficiaries are desperate and effectively hostage. Reflecting on these types of “educational” programs, Charles Sullivan writes:

Of course it is not in the self-interest of capitalism to educate people who can see capitalism for what it is, to think critically about it, and perhaps even do something to change it. Corporate education exists to promote programming consumers and providing an obedient workforce to an unfair slave wage system, not to provide society with a well-informed and politically active citizenry. In fact these are the things that pose the greatest threat to America’s corporate oligarchy.92

Once private organizations take charge of schools, whether for-profit or philanthropic, publics are left with little democratic oversight or control. People far removed from students and classrooms make decisions that become imposed upon educators with impunity. In districts where constituents are not vigilantly engaged in their children’s education, the logic of capital wreaks soul-crushing havoc.

Like Sinclair, Jonathan Kozol spent years travelling the country, investigating its schools. In the cities Kozol found “industry-imbedded” schools carrying names such as Academy of Enterprise and Corporate Academy that funnel poor, minority students into low-paying jobs. In Columbus, Ohio, for example, young students are asked to choose their careers while sitting inside classroom walls lined with posters from JC Penny, Wal-Mart, Kmart, and Sears. Company-scripted lesson plans compel them to act out the roles of cashier and manager. “I’m in the business of developing minds to meet a market demand,” states one Chicago school principal, whose school’s contract with its curriculum design company stipulates that agents will visit and police classrooms to ensure that teachers stick to their scripts.93

Kozol describes Taylorism and Skinnerian behavioral modification pedagogies dominating impoverished and heavily segregated classrooms. “Do exactly what I say, when I say it, and you’ll get it right. Otherwise, you’ll get it wrong,” one teacher told her fourth-grade students at a privately-run school in New York City. There and elsewhere he observed direct-command, rote-and-drill pedagogies featuring the terminology of business and commerce. One principal, Mr. Endicott, referred to his school’s curriculum as “horrific for the teachers and boring for the children…an intellectual straight jacket.”94 Here, where parents are not highly involved and education is turned
over to the profit motive, teachers become trapped and stifled by rigidly prescribed standards and curricula; their students receive an education suitable for a life of poverty in the dregs of the economy.  

At the same time more students than ever are being suspended, expelled, and even sent from their schools to prison as a result of zero-tolerance policies adopted by 80 percent of the nation’s schools during the 1990’s. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s Legal Defense and Education Fund (NAACP, LDF) reports that high school freshmen are being convicted of felonious assault for stealing lunch money from classmates. Police are arresting and interrogating students for writing on their desks and handcuffing kindergartners who throw tantrums. During the 2010 school year police in the state of Texas handed out close to 300 thousand “Class C misdemeanor” tickets to children as young as six, which involved fines, community service, and even prison sentences for “crimes” as innocuous as “disrupting class” or throwing paper airplanes. Increasingly, police officers conduct regular patrols of schools armed with pepper spray, handcuffs, and handguns. Although it is not the only state to do so, the number of school districts in Texas with their own police departments has risen more than 20-fold since 2001. There police are disproportionately confronting, detaining, tasering, and arresting poor, disabled, and minority students. As young children become branded as “troublemakers,” they find themselves increasingly targeted for “correction” by State institutions. Statistics show that school punishment correlates to later involvement with the criminal justice system. Texas supreme court chief justice, Wallace Jefferson, warns that “[c]harging kids with criminal offenses for low-level behavioral issues” is likely driving many of them into a life of imprisonment. Across the country, students are growing accustomed to penal-colony-style regimes of surveillance, discipline, and punishment. Many of those who do not grow up to serve their purposes as JC Penny cashiers or Wal-Mart shelf-stockers will wind up in the nation’s sprawling prison labor camps.  

Elsewhere, in schools of the affluent, students similarly learn to become docile and acquiescent, although not in the face of their own impoverishment. While the hand of the State extends far less into bourgeois schools, Kozol finds a pervasive bias to go along with things and to always “be positive.” Never knock anything unless you are ready to offer a better alternative. The slumlord’s daughter, for example, is discouraged from asking about the tenants whose rent payments make her lifestyle possible. The bank-director’s son is dissuaded from discussing her mother’s pursuit of home foreclosures. Because liberal ideology tells us that it is not right to demonize any group of people, we carry on as if no one is implicated in any case of misery or inhumanity.  

Consider that a preponderance of those most centrally responsible for our recent economic calamity took their degrees from Harvard University, often esteemed to be our oldest and most
respected institution of higher education. Emerson remarked in 1861. In 1984, Calvin Trillin reported in The New Yorker that 90 percent of Harvard Law School graduates go on to work for corporate law firms. Few of these lawyers make any pretense to benefiting society. Studies show that socially irresponsible corporations usually have to compensate their employees with “conscience money.” Camel tobacco, for example, pays artists 17 percent more than the American Cancer Society for the same work. Judge Lawrence Silberman, of the U.S. Court of Appeals, says that “Lawyers really see pro bono services as the penance they pay for serving a capitalist system.” It should be no surprise, Trillin wrote, that the preeminent schools of a capitalist society produce graduates who serve that society’s preeminent capitalists. 

Harvard is by no stretch of the imagination the only institution deserving of scrutiny. At my Ohio State University the grand performing arts center bears the name of a prominent capitalist donor. This February, OSU President Gordon Gee announced the Board of Trustees’ unanimous vote to add Les Wexner’s name the university’s medical center:

His strategic vision and clarity of purpose have been instrumental in realizing many of the University’s great advancements...For more than three decades, Mr. Wexner has been one of the University’s most committed leaders and ardent supporters. His generous contributions, both in time and resources, have been wholly transformational, but his most valuable gift has been his remarkable leadership...I have every confidence that his leadership and clear purpose will continue to advance our work in important and enduring ways.

Months prior to this statement, news broke that the cotton used to spin Wexner’s Victoria’s Secret lingerie was being harvested by ten-year-old children in Burkina Faso laboring under horrific conditions and receiving regular beatings from their bosses. Wexner did not order these beatings; perhaps he was even unaware of the poor conditions; yet these are the material sources of his profits and of the money given to OSU. An argument could be made that both Wexner and OSU, as the principal beneficiaries of these practices, have a duty of awareness and a responsibility to sever their relation to what amounts to child slavery. History has often shown, however, that we cannot count upon leaders of institutions and captains of industry to take such strong ethical stands. Instead these must frequently be imposed from below, by fugitive citizen stakeholders causing disruptions, making trouble, and holding elites accountable.

At school and work, the rat race to the top disincentivizes challenges to institutionalized injustice. Meanwhile our student governments and team meetings govern our schools and workplaces in the same way that Maggie Simpson’s toy steering wheel drives Marge’s car. Nevertheless, the oppressed are awakening and drawing connections between their own lives and the larger evils of our capitalist society.
Conclusion

“Students cannot learn democracy in the school because the school is not a democratic place.”


“Why, in a democratic society, should an individual’s first real contact with a formal institution be so profoundly anti-democratic?”


“What we really need is real democracy, and unfortunately, what we have right now is mayoral dictatorship over the schools. So, they close the schools, they do whatever they want, and nobody gets any say. None of the teachers get a say, no parents get a say, and students certainly don’t get any say. I’m here tonight because the panel for educational policy, a panel of Bloomberg’s puppets, is here to close down as many high schools as they can in the process of neoliberal education reform to open up privatized charter schools. This is a direct and racially motivated attack on our communities, and we came here tonight to shut it down.”

Brian Jones (Teacher) and Tafador Saurov (Student), New York City Schools, February 9, 2012

“Dear New York City: We, the students of public education, are here to inform you about the injustice that is taking place in our school system, the privatization of our school system, the budget cuts, lack of appropriate leadership, malicious closings, phase-outs of schools against community wishes, cell-phone policies, overcrowded classes, and abuse of safe-homes, over-policing and over-criminalization of our youth. We feel that these issues are setting our students up for failure and we demand a change. We believe that trying to control our schools is just another symptom of the blatant racism in our country similar to the government’s response to the senseless killing of Trayvon Martin. Because of this our first action will be a mass student walk-out on May 1st at 2 p.m. to Fort Greene Park. We will be holding teach-ins, teen summits, and other peaceful events. Please add your name to our letter and support us in our struggle for our education.”

Student Leadership, Paul Robeson High School, April 17, 2012

Since the days of the Common School, our ruling capitalist class has wielded unrivaled power over the education of each next generation. This class has made every effort to ensure that its schools purvey the ideology and mythology of capitalism, its schools adjust students to the moral economy of wage slavery, and its schools faithfully reproduce social conditions optimal for the growth and accumulation of capital. Thus education, the process of constituting human beings, is treated not as a human right and need, but rather an engine of exploitation. The corporate world sees in schools, students, and teachers, a field of profits ripe for harvest. This is the institutional context within which so many teachers nobly endeavor to educate wise democratic citizens.
Since Upton Sinclair’s time, elite liberal doctrine has defined citizens as people who know and uphold the laws of the land and involve themselves in the political sphere only to promote and extend their private interests. Consequently civics curricula have sought predominantly to maximize individual student chances of achieving success in life according to the undemocratic rules of our political economy. “Good” and “loyal citizens” remain passive, refrain from “getting political,” and respond to national catastrophes by taking out their credit cards and “get[ting] down to Disney World in Florida.”

In school we learn not only how to live in association with others according to certain rules, roles, and structures, but also what life goals are worth pursuing. In the game of life espoused by our Black Hand, we strive against our fellows according to a competition that ensures the success of some and the failure of many. Every exertion in this competition is a turn of Ixion’s wheel that fuels the engines of capital and strengthens the relations of our own exploitation. By adulthood most of us have learned, in the habits of our daily lives, to faithfully reproduce the conditions of our collective servitude. This is a herd behavior; and it may indeed be that we are herd animals, doomed like lemmings to run each other off the cliff.

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2 Lester Frank Ward, *Education* (1872). Quoted in Bowles & Gintis, 125.


8 Spivey, 3-9.

9 Ibid., 20, 26.

10 Ibid., 27.

11 Ibid., 30-31.

12 Ibid., 36.

13 Ibid., 94.
14 McWilliams, “American Political Thought since the Civil War: Progressivism and W.E.B. Du Bois.”
15 Spivey, 53-60.
16 Ibid., 86.
17 Ibid., 77-88.
18 Ibid., 99-101.
20 William Heard Kilpatrick, “The Educational Frontier” (Ayer Company Publishers, 1969 (1933)).
25 Ibid., 232-233.
29 For example, see Urban & Wagoner, Bowles & Gintis, or Westbrook, Democratic Hope.
30 Bowles & Gintis, 163.
31 Ibid., 155-156.
32 Ibid., 164.
33 Ibid., 176-177.
36 Quoted in Bowles & Gintis, 18.
37 Ibid., 59.
38 Herbert Spencer, Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1860 (1891)).
40 Ravitch, 78.
41 Ibid., 123-129.
42 Bowles & Gintis, 196.
43 Upton Sinclair, The Goslings (Pasadena, CA, 1924), 72.
46 “The Funeral of Democracy” is a chapter heading in Sinclair, The Goslings, 253. Sinclair is most famous for writing The Jungle (1906), which exposed the American public to the grimy realities of its meat industry. It is said that President Teddy Roosevelt was eating his regular morning sausages while reading the book. Chewing over descriptions of borax and human fingers thrown into rotten, rat-infested mixing tanks, Roosevelt spit out the sausage and immediately pushed through the Pure Food and Drug Act (1906), which provided for the first systematic inspection and labeling of food products in the United States. Sinclair had intended the book as a microcosmic critique of the evils of unfettered capitalism; but, as he said, The Jungle hit readers in the stomach rather than the heart. For the rest of his career, he systematically attacked the corruption and despotism of capitalist industry.
48 Ibid., 7.
49 Ibid., 42.
50 Ibid., 225-226.
51 Ibid., 45.
52 Ibid., 46-47.
53 Ibid., 50.
54 Ibid., 51.
55 Ibid., 46-47.
56 Quoted in Ibid., 90.
57 Quoted in Ibid., 91.
58 Ibid., 93.
59 Ibid., 224.
60 Ibid., 443-444.
61 Ibid., 415-416.
62 The sort of education that Dewey professed, which trained an executive mentality and that many of the wisest parents would want for their children, tends today to exist as a preserve of the elites. The Obama daughters, for example, attended Dewey’s old Laboratory School in Chicago. Well-resourced private schools enjoy more protection from impositions of the State. Yet their price tags, often in the 30 to 40 thousand-dollar range, seem to serve as barriers to the lower classes rather than educational necessities. As I point out in Chapter 8, schools with far less funding have successfully implemented Dewey’s model. However, these schools seem to be exceptional in their relative autonomy, i.e., lack of State coercion.
64 Sinclair, The Goose Step, ix, 18.


67 Ibid., 192.

68 Ibid., 199.

69 Ibid., 200-203.

70 Ibid., 208-210.


72 Ibid., 200-213.

73 Cited in Battistoni, 101.

74 Lowen, 288.


76 Ibid., 21-22.


78 Quoted in ibid., 485.


83 Ibid.

84 Pauline Lipman and Nathan Haines, “From Accountability to Privatization and African American Exclusion: Chicago’s ‘Renaissance 2010,’” in Educational Policy, Vol. 21, No. 3 (July, 2007), 490.

85 Ibid., 485-493.

86 Quoted in The One Percent.

87 Barkan.

88 Ibid.


90 Barkan.

92 Quoted in Ibid.


94 Ibid., 89.


99 McGreal.


101 McGreal.


103 Ibid., 31.

104 Kozol’s ethnographic work points to a relation between a school’s economic level and the autonomy afforded to teachers. State and federal policies target low-SES schools in great disproportion. These policies tend to be intrusive and prescriptive in nature, which is good if the goal is control, but bad if the goal is self-direction. If we consider that students learn most through example, then the denial of power and voice to teachers will wreak similar impact upon students. Jim Garrison’s “Teacher as Prophetic Trickster” cleverly illustrates how wily teachers skirt mandated standards, curricula, and lesson plans in order to steal time for what they consider truly valuable to their students’ education. See Jim Garrison, “Teacher as Prophetic Trickster,” Educational Theory, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2009), 67-83.


Quoted in ibid., 42-43.

Trillin, 54.

Gordon Gee, in an email sent to OSU students, faculty, staff, and alumni (February 10, 2012).


Westbrook, 250-251.


CHAPTER FIVE:

CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION,

OUR DUAL FRONTS IN THE WAR FOR DEMOCRACY

Introduction

“In fact, if a man dare attempt to sum up the spiritual condition of his time, he might say of ours that it has lost authority and retained the need of it. We are freer than we are strong. We have more responsibility than we have capacity. And if we wish to state what the future sets for us, we might say, I think, that we must find within ourselves the certainty which the external world has lost.”

Walter Lippmann, Drift and Mastery, 1914

The enslavement of the working class owes itself less to the obstinacy of our plutocracy than to the weakness of our democracy. I have spoken of our capitalist political economy as a game constituted by certain rules, roles, and structures that we collectively reproduce through the habits and relations of our daily lives. In order to reduce this game to its fundamental components, I will characterize it as a war waged along the dual fronts of consumption and production. We are slaves not only to the capitalist mode of production, as Marx had it, but also to our own desires. As we strive to fulfill those desires and endeavor to achieve success as both consumers and producers, according to the criteria of our larger culture, we cannot help but turn the wheel that fuels capital and crushes democracy. Emancipation requires us not to compete and win in this game, for capital is prefigured to win regardless, but rather to play with the purpose of working together to democratize industry, end the wage system, and replace our logic of scarcity with an economy of abundance.

The Progressive Era in American history marks the victory of consumerism, and the concomitant defeat of self-government, as the defining element of American culture. Once it appeared that citizens lacked the competence to contribute to the progress of civilization through popular government, the country embraced the promise of increasing material abundance—universal access to the good things in life—as a consolation prize and accepted Taylorism as a means to achieving it. In many ways, this corrupt bargain paid off. During the second half of the 20th century
an unprecedented number of Americans enjoyed a middle-class culture of comfort and convenience. However, this culture also defined its criteria for citizenship in the image of that savage and untamed creature, *homo economicus*.

**Slaves to Desire**

“As appetite, a universal wolf.”

*William Shakespeare, circa 1600*

“Perhaps when we find ourselves wanting everything, it is because we are dangerously close to wanting nothing.”

*Sylvia Plath, 1955*

“People whose governing habit is the relinquishment of power, competence, and responsibility, and whose characteristic suffering is the anxiety of futility, make excellent spenders. They are the ideal consumers. By inducing in them little panics of boredom, powerlessness, sexual failure, mortality, paranoia, they can be made to buy (or vote for) virtually anything that is ‘attractively packaged.’”

*Wendell Barry, The Unsettling of America, 1977*

This summer, *Adbusters* magazine published two simple, but striking, complementary images. On one half of the page a photograph shows a pack of rats devouring a beautiful cake left on the pavement. On the other half a pretty, young woman picks out ice cream at the grocery freezer. Rats and humans share a common genetic ancestry, reaching back more than 100 million years. In a profound way, we share the rat’s powerful appetite. Just as some lab rats will eat to the point that they become too heavy to walk, some humans display insatiable appetites, eating until they cripple and eventually kill themselves. But human desire far outstrips that of rats in kind and quantity.

Throughout history, philosophers have weighed in on humanity’s voracious wants and habits of consumption. The Romans and early Christians believed that moral wisdom lay in the limitation, not multiplication, of needs and desires. During the 18th century, Rousseau used the word “enslavement” when describing bourgeois society’s escalating cycle of demand for consumer goods. Of course, Adam Smith, along with John Locke and David Hume, saw this escalation as a virtue insofar as ambition and greed stimulated industry and invention. Yet, at the same time, these men recognized the great threat posed by commercial societies. Constant stimulation of want perniciously spurred acquisitive individualism at the expense of general welfare. Smith hoped that an “invisible
hand,” or “home bias,” would guide the new class of capitalist acquirors back to their native soil and remind them of their duty to the greater good.9

In early America, the foremost champion of the Common School movement, Horace Mann, claimed that the progress of civilization had “increased temptations a thousand-fold.”10 Lacking the strong traditional authority of church and community, men and women risked becoming slaves to their own passions. One function of the Common School would be to step in place of those old institutions and fetter people’s rampant desires.

Reaching back to antiquity, Plato had much to say about the relationship between education and desire. Desire is not all bad, according to Plato, but we must be able to distinguish healthy from unhealthy desires, tuning the former and quieting the latter. Education, he said, is to be a nurturer and guardian of one’s desires. For example, Plato believed that music and poetry could discipline the soul. He advocated military training as a way of identifying and cultivating those individuals who could successfully tame their desires in favor of their spirits.11 However, he recognized that not everyone was capable of this. Some, whom he named “Oligarchic” men, exhibited “beggarly and vicious” desires, singularly pursuing wealth and luxury in life at the expense of citizenship and the common good.12 As my friend and colleague, Brett Weiss, has written, educators must be careful what they nurture their students to desire, because tinkering with what education desires from students is tantamount to tinkering with what the students themselves desire.13

As Plato was well aware, responsible citizenship requires that we temper our passions in consideration of others. But the historical record seems to suggest that this may be a hopeless task. As the anthropologist, Marshal Sahlins, put it,

The development of modern Western ‘civilization’ has depended upon an enormous soft drug culture, at least as a condition of tolerability, marked by daily general consumption of such substances as tea, coffee, chocolate, tobacco and sugar—a list without much redeeming nutritive value.14

In fact, Sahlins writes, upon close inspection the modern capitalist economy appears “a global market in human frailties,” whose contours have been shaped by the sorts of “beggarly and vicious desires” of which Plato warned.15

Sahlins notes that the British began importing tea from China, 143 lbs., in the year 1650. By 1740, the Dutch East India Company was importing two million lbs. annually and 20 million by 1800. Tea quickly became “an indispensable necessity of life…the ‘household god’ to which everything else was sacrificed.”16 In order to pay for this habit, the English first liquidated their famous silver, wool, steel, and iron reserves at bargain-basement prices. “Until the early 1800’s,” Sahlins writes, “China was the tomb of European silver.”17 By the 1830’s, Great Britain found itself unable to balance its trade deficits with the Chinese. Rather than reducing import and consumption
rates, the country waged the First and Second Opium Wars, between 1839 and 1860. After winning access to the Eastern market, the English traders faced no deficit of demand for the drug.

Something similar, but interesting-for-different-reasons, occurred between America and Hawaii during the early-19th century. Facing its first major financial crisis, known as the Panic of 1819, the United States sent merchants to the Hawaiian Islands, stocked with all manner of modern wares: pins, scissors, clothing, kitchen utensils, billiard tables, sailboats, armaments, and more. In response, a speculative fever broke out amongst the islands’ nobility. Local chiefs competed aggressively with each other, displaying what seemed an insatiable hunger for Western commodities. After pawning away all their hoarded riches, the chiefs began to purchase on credit. And here they turned viciously upon their own subjects, imposing brutal austerity measures while demanding increases in production. H.S. Bloxam, a visitor to the islands during the 1820’s, observed that almost all of the members of the royal families weighed between 250-300 lbs., while rank-and-file Hawaiians labored on starvation rations.¹⁸ Rapt in competitive and consumptive fever, the Hawaiian chiefs, like so many other rulers before and after them, subjugated and brutalized their own people, working them nearly to death in order to satisfy their worldly desires.

The growth of market economies during the 17th and 18th centuries offered individuals access to a new galaxy of commodities and lifestyles. Proliferation of consumer choices over the next two-hundred-plus years freed humanity from grunt work while providing an unprecedented diversity of interests and pastimes. However, even today, the plenitude of consumer choices remains under lock and key. Our wealth—or lack of it—determines where we can live, how we can eat, and what sorts of opportunities we can offer our children. Regardless of social class, the desire to participate in consumer culture is powerful. Last year in London, poor residents of Tottenham, Hertfordshire, and elsewhere expressed this desire violently through four days of riots. Although fueled ostensibly by their disenfranchisement, for which the police killing of Mark Duggan served as tipping point, the rioters’ disobedience took the form of looting neighborhood shops to acquire name-brand clothing and apparel. These actions say much about our culture. We live, writes Slavoj Zizek,

> [in] a society which celebrates choice but in which the only available alternative to enforced consensus is a blind acting out. Opposition to the system can no longer articulate itself in the form of a realistic alternative…the only choice is between playing by the rules and self-destructive violence…what we saw was not men reduced to ‘beasts,’ but the stripped-down form of the ‘beast’ produced by capitalist ideology.¹⁹

For more than a century, and particularly since WWII, Americans have lived in the heart, that is, the engine, of global empire. Our middle-class comforts, albeit the fruits of our own hard work, come at the cost of misery abroad. Slave factories in China are the counterparts to our cozy laptop coffee
shops. American highways and byways are inseparable from the warfare plaguing the people of the Middle East.

In an essay titled “Emerson and the Education of Nature,” Bryan Warnick invokes Emerson’s belief that consumers in an industrial society are no less responsible for its injustices than are producers. “Emerson recognized that in any economic system there is no relevant moral distinction between those who produce unjustly and those who enjoy the unjust production.”20 In the same vein, Reinhold Niebuhr penned the following reflection after visiting a Detroit auto factory in 1929:

Here manual labor is drudgery and toil is slavery. The men cannot possibly find any satisfaction in their work. They simply work to make a living. Their sweat and dull pain are part of the price paid for the fine cars we all run. And most of us run the cars without knowing what price is being paid for them.21

Here Niebuhr alludes to the fact that the money relation in market societies blinds consumers to the aesthetics of production. When I purchase a pair of shoes all I see is the finished product and the pretty smile of the girl who hands me my receipt. I do not see the sorrow on the faces of the women who have spent their sunniest years behind a sewing machine, inside a cramped, windowless maquiladora.22

The events of 2010-2011 offered our consumer culture a glimpse into the ramifications of its gluttony. In April of 2010 we witnessed how our thirst for oil pushed British Petroleum to hazard ecological catastrophe in the Gulf Coast. The following year the Arab Spring brought us photographs of tear gas canisters, bearing the label “Made in the USA,” that police had shot at peaceful protestors clamoring for democracy and an end to decades of tyranny. All across the Middle East our empire has supplied dictators with weapons of war in order that they may subjugate their own working class and keep the flow of cheap oil coming our way.23 Ultimately we cannot have democracy at home while pressing empire abroad. Cheap labor and the murder of organizers in Columbia and Bangladesh become union busting and austerity in Wisconsin and Ohio.24 Couch potatoes in Houston more and more resemble opium den captives in Hong Kong. The imperial spirit and its attendant organizational forms inevitably despoil the larger culture, a despotism that lives by the herd-like support of the citizen-consumer.25

A democratic challenge to consumerism does not mean that we must forsake all luxury goods or that we cannot all live in decent homes and own quality automobiles. Simply, it entails that we recognize the social relationships inherent to any market transaction and appreciate the labor invested into each and every commodity. In some cases we can make choices not to patronize establishments that treat their workers cruelly or otherwise violate our ethical and moral standards. Responsible and moderated habits of consumption can constitute one of the ways we carry out the duties of democratic
citizenship. Standing in the way of this educational goal is a multi-billion dollar marketing and advertising industry.

Prior to WWI, businesses had assumed that information drives consumer behavior and thus attempted to sell their products by way of logical appeals. Understanding that human beings are not rational choosers, Sigmund Freud’s nephew, Ed Bernays, revolutionized the field of marketing and advertising by appealing to the consumer’s emotions and fears. In the war’s aftermath, major corporations including Rockefeller, General Motors, and General Electric, enlisted Bernays in shaping the public’s taste for fashion, home appliances, and a new galaxy of consumer goods. “Instead of a mind,” Bernays wrote,

universal literacy has given [humanity] rubber stamps, rubber stamps inked with advertising slogans…with the trivialities of the tabloids and the platitudes of history…We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of…Modern propaganda is a consistent, enduring effort…it is regimenting the public mind every bit as much as an army regiments the bodies of its soldiers.26

When Allied forces stormed Berlin in April of 1945, they discovered Bernays’ books among Josef Goebels’ library. The strategies and techniques Goebels had used to promote Arian superiority to the Germans would be enlisted by marketers and advertisers to sell Lucky Strikes and Coca-Colas to Americans. In order to win the customer’s loyalty and patronage, the drug pusher first invests in producing a need, longing, desire, for more, always more. For two generations now, televisions shows such as Dallas and Desperate Housewives have planted ideal visions of the consumer society into the popular mind. Hollywood and fashion magazines alert us to our inferiorities and at the next page or product placement offer remedies, commodities to make us happier, more beautiful and virile.

The average American child is daily bombarded with an estimated 3500 commercial messages by marketers who speak of “branding” them as young as infancy, so that they can “own them in that way.” Child-marketer James McNeal goes as far as targeting “the consumer embryo” still inside the mother’s womb.27 Educating these children and the adults they will become to act as responsible consumer-citizens of our global village appears a Herculean task. Although schools and teachers perform crucial work in helping students to tame their desires and combat the marketing and advertising industry, alone they are Don Quixote swinging their swords at the tidal wave of our greater economic life.28

Backed by the staggering resources of our corporate masters, political machines have brought the strategies and techniques of the public relations industry to new levels of power and sophistication.29 Rather than representing the people, our constitutional democracy is managed, packaged, and re-presented by opinion polls, pundits, and election-cycle burlesque. Just as the drug addict fails to carry out the duties of family life, those living unresisting under the lies of State propaganda cannot exercise the responsibilities of democracy.30
Similar to the way the ancient Greeks and Romans had reasons for accepting pederasts, our culture has its reasons for accepting child marketers and advertisers. A century ago our ancestors lost the battle for control over the economic sphere of daily life. Since then we have confused work and shopping for participation in democratic society. Habits of consumption remain intimately bound to social relations of production. Making sense of this connection may help us come to terms with our enslavement to capital and perhaps guide us toward the evanescent specter of democracy.

Out-Producing the World

"[C]onsensus would have it that material production, despite its dysfunctions and irrationalities, opens onto an excess of wealth and social purpose. We are all complicitous in this myth. It is the alpha and omega of our modernity, without which the credibility of our social organization would collapse. Well, the fact is that it is collapsing."


During WWII, while America’s young men fought overseas, its young women, such as my grandmother, worked 80-hour weeks inside armaments factories building tanks and fighter planes. This army of citizen-producers deserves as much credit for defeating fascism as the soldiers fighting in Germany. Following the war, production remained a guiding ethic of American culture. As Charles Taylor put it, production came to constitute a shared horizon of life’s meaning and significance, a central backdrop against which the country could pursue progress and seek a better future.

Post-WWII America conceived itself, writes Taylor, as a society of work, a large-scale enterprise of production in which widely diverse functions interdependently combined to produce the greater good. This predominantly economic social order offered members a sense of community based in common meanings: the idea of defending a way of life and building a better future for its children. The very fabric of society called forth the discipline and volition required from each member to successfully operate within the grand economic enterprise. Taylor insists that such a civilization, requiring from individuals an unprecedented level of disciplined, sustained, and monotonous effort, had to be endowed with something beyond mere material significance. "[T]he process of production itself,” wrote Joseph Piepers in 1952, “is understood and proclaimed as the activity that gives meaning to human existence.” This ethic simultaneously bereaves those who cannot produce, i.e., the unemployed, of an important sense of worth and dignity.

Michael Young’s Rise of the Meritocracy (1958) proffered a dystopian society in which political and economic institutions promote the most worthy, i.e., those who are the smartest and most
productive, into positions of control and influence. Young was later horrified to find that America and Great Britain had actually adopted “rule by the cleverest” as a social model and thereby abandoned the democratic project of “rule by the people.” As in the novel, educational institutions deployed IQ tests throughout the 1950’s and 60’s to identify and channel the meritorious into the hierarchies of industry. These tests measured what was most important to our economy: speed and efficiency, how many problems one could solve and how many operations one could compute in a limited amount of time; they did not measure and in some cases even discouraged qualities such as character, imagination, and cooperation. In our schools, writes Marcus Raskin,

Students are urged to fulfill an achievement profile of themselves which is primarily derived from requirements and functions set by the colonizer’s needs…But even knowing that the records and papers of a system tell us more about the system than the people who are stamped with them, the student seems unable to escape the image created for him—as him—through the hierarchic other…Children in [this] colonized world find themselves on the bed of Procrustes. They are expected to be tools of forces that they cannot see, understand, or control.

According to the performance criteria of our economic institutions, the finest individuals are those who best serve the needs of capital: efficient and productive workers, atomized and divided from each other, who do not cease in their work to question its value or ultimate purpose.

Capitalist political economy lives by an ethic that preys upon our frailties and by an ideology that exposes the weakness of our language and thought. The rules of our game of life assure us that not everyone can be successful. For every man and woman who achieves a decent life, an equal number will be cast into destitution. Against this backdrop school and work become contests to acquire those objective markers, SAT scores, degrees, titles, etc., which provide access to desirable commodities such as food, shelter, and sexual partners. Our inherited logical grammar of scarcity and individualism affords us few alternatives but to persist competing in the war of all against all.

John Locke lived and wrote at a time of labor scarcity, when more men and women were always needed to carry out socially-necessary work. He could not envision a world such as ours in which only a small portion of the population could carry out all the necessary work of production. Western culture has enjoyed a labor surplus for quite some time now. Within this context, our competitive-productive ethic has become irrational and insidious. There are more than enough workers with more than enough knowledge and skill to perform the labor necessary to maintain a decent life for everyone. Yet because one small class owns the land and means of production, every advance of automation and globalization threatens our employment and makes our lives more precarious. While jobs are sent overseas to be performed by men and women who will accept slave wages so that capital may grow more efficiently, American workers are idled and their children threatened with starvation.

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The unpredictable nature of the global economy suggests that no one is in control of the enterprise. Trapped within the vicissitudes of this maddeningly impersonal terrorism, the working class divides against itself. Isolated from our fellow producers by the competitive ideology of our masters, we become angry and afraid. Demagogues offer up immigrants and ethnic minorities as easy targets against whom to direct our rage. Hatred breeds itself as resurgent racism, homophobia, and nativism, all of which give outlet to the people’s legitimate yet tragically misguided grievances. But the empirical fact is that there is plenty to go around; we only need a strategy for more intelligently, i.e., democratically, organizing ourselves and efforts. Doing so will require us to purge the ideologies of scarcity and competitive individualism with which capital infects us.

Conclusion

“The forty-hour workweek is the bane of civilization. It is a cancer which eats at the human spirit, until the only thing left is an over-weight, underachieving, prime-time addicted android which vaguely resembles a man, yet lacks the exuberance and creativity that is seen so clearly in the eyes of a child. Society takes humans and turns them into workforce-robots. We are the most recent incarnation of the Stepford generation. We’ve been literally brainwashed into believing that a strong ‘work ethic’ is a virtue, which will somehow magically infuse us with a sense of pride and accomplishment. This is the most pathetic load of dung I’ve ever heard. Has anyone ever stopped to consider the possibility that if humans had more time to devote to ourselves, we might not need to artificially instill ourselves with false pride, based on the magnitude of our bankbooks, but rather on our intellectual and spiritual accomplishments? I cannot count the times I have met some so-called ‘successful person,’ only to find out that he or she possessed the I.Q. of a sewer rat, with values to match. These types can usually be found congregating in and around government offices and state capitals...Do I have the answer? No, but at least I have recognized the problem, and surely that is the first step towards rectification.”

Craig Manelli, “The Curse of Civilization”

Given flesh within the course of daily life, the rules and structures of our political economy function to protect the aims of capital from the threat of democracy. Backed by a popular ideology of individualism and material scarcity, capital divides the working class against itself and keeps it engaged in a futile rat race for achievement. Born into the role of beast of burden whose life purpose is to toil for the enlargement of capital, the laborer is given license to strive individually to satisfy his desires. But desires left unfettered within a predatory market culture know no bounds.

At one point or another, most of us desire to escape the rat race altogether. The ideal of leaving the office and becoming one’s own boss remains universally appealing. Yet independent proprietorship is doubtful for most. Instead professionalism and independent wealth appear as the most commonly viable avenues of escape. Unfortunately, the freedom glimpsed at the end of this tunnel is an illusion. The professional has been swallowed whole into the belly of our corporate
leviathan. While perhaps a few of us will find haven in this industrial prison planet, or be able to buy our way out of wage enslavement, we cannot collectively buy our way out of the farce of consumer democracy.

1 Lippmann, Drift and Mastery, 116.
4 Wendell Berry, The Unsettling of America (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1977), 24.
6 Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 45.
7 Ibid., 52.
8 Ibid., 53-8.
10 Lasch, 60.
12 Ibid., 550d-555b, 554c.
15 Ibid., 8.
17 Sahlins, 13.
18 Ibid., 28-33.
22 Educating for Justice, a Christian liberationist organization, reports that 90 percent of the clothing sold in the United States is produced in a sweatshop somewhere around the world. Cited in Freedom Fries: And Other Stupidity We’ll Have to Explain to Our Grandchildren, Dir. Carl Christman (2005).
During the 1950’s the U.S. State Department drafted what it called the “Grand Area” doctrine, referring to the Middle-East as “probably the richest economic prize in the world.” Under this policy the American State has endeavored to “maintain unquestioned power and limit the exercise of sovereignty.” In order to preserve economic colonialism, the Pentagon had lent its support—financial and military—to crushing popular democratic uprisings and propping up megalomaniacal dictators. For example, after Iran’s democratically-elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mosaddeq, undertook in 1952 to nationalize the country’s oil fields, President Eisenhower spent over one billion dollars to forcibly unseat Mosaddeq’s government and install the Shah of Iran as a Western-business-friendly theocrat. Backed by the largely unwitting consent of the American consumer, the U.S. State has played a similar role throughout Latin America, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the world: securing access to cheap resources by crushing democracy and aiding the murder of innocents through support of dictators. As evidenced by its recent backing of rebels in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the Administration’s support for dictators extends only so far as they—Mubarak, Gaddafi, Ben Ali—can keep their subjects in line. Following the Arab Spring revolutions, the American State will seek to quickly re-establish colonial relations of resource extraction in those countries through new-look puppet regimes. See Noam Chomsky, “Who Owns the World,” TomDispatch (April 21, 2011), http://www.tomdispatch.com/archive/175382/.


Lummis, 137. He writes: “Two centuries ago Edmund Burke feared that the breakers of law in India might return to become the makers of law in England; his fears have proved well founded.” But it is not only through consumption that we support empire. Legislators who close armaments factories in their districts face the wrath of voters who lose their jobs at those factories. For many workers, reigning in the havoc of the military-industrial complex means to unemployment and destitution.


A recent study conducted at the University of North Carolina finds that a majority of students on campus “navigate ethical propositions based only on time, feeling, benefit and desire. Principles such as honor, valor, virtue, morality, God, chivalry, familial piety…were non-factors.” The same students lacked language with which to articulate ethical queries about consumerism and accepted the market as “a benign and neutral reality.” See Christian Smith, et al., Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood (Cambridge, MA: Oxford University Press, 2011). Reported by Darren Fleet, “Good Times on Campus,” Adbusters America, Vol. 20, No. 1 (January/February, 2012).


Lummis, 35.

In Baudrillard, 80.

34 Joseph Piepers, Leisure the Basis of Culture (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2009 (1952)).

35 Suzan McWilliams, “American Political Thought Since the Civil War: The Third Republic: Labor-Saving, Productivity, and Its Effects” [audio lecture] (Haverford College, April 27, 2005).

36 Michael Young, Rise of the Meritocracy (Transaction Publishers, 1994 (1958)).


39 The Southern Poverty Law Center finds that the number of hate groups in America has risen from 600 to 1000 since the year 2000 and is largely attributable to the growing gap between rich and poor. Democracy Now (March 8, 2012), http://www.democracynow.org/2012/3/8/headlines#9.

CHAPTER SIX:

WHAT “ACHIEVEMENT” MEANS

Introduction

“The means employed by the lust for power have changed, but the same volcano continues to glow, the impatience and the immoderate love demand their sacrifice: and what one formerly did ‘for the sake of God’ one now does for the sake of money, that is to say, for the sake of that which now gives the highest feeling of power and good conscience.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, Will to Power, circa 1886

Born into the role of the beast of burden whose life purpose is to toil for the enlargement of capital, the laborer is given license to strive individually for success as a means to satisfying his carnal desires and escaping his condition of wage enslavement. It is commonly held that professionalism offers a means of escape by affording autonomy. However, professionals fall no less under the total dominion of capital than do wage workers. Each step taken and every turn of Ixion’s wheel made according to the horizons of success afforded by our political economy serve only to strengthen capital and intensify the exploitation of the working class. The same horizons and consequences of academic achievement plague our schools.

Demotic power can be neither discovered nor wielded by a people convinced that dog-eat-dog is a doom from which humanity cannot escape. The Hobbesian war of all against all brings out the most thoroughly anti-democratic qualities in our species. Those fittest to triumph in this game frequently prove themselves only the most despicable. More than a few bad apples or poor individual characters, close inspection exposes the loathsomeness of the game itself.

Desperate to Escape

“What I want to see above all is that this country remains a country where someone can always get rich. That’s the one thing we have and that must be preserved.”
In the popular mind, schooling incorporates the same rules of play as our larger political economy by identifying and rewarding the meritorious. Yet this premise repudiates a basic democratic faith in equality. In a meritocracy we must believe that people are unequally endowed and differentially deserving. The pyramidal shape of our economy imposes a distribution of outcomes in school.

There is a culture of competition in American schools and this is not an entirely bad thing. Competition is an invaluable pedagogical tool for spurring fruitful learning activity. However, we must realize that, equal to the larger economy, schooling prefigures a spectrum of success and failure. Standardized tests, the gate-keeping instruments to higher-education credentials, are calibrated to produce a distribution of outcomes: a small cohort of winners supported by a vast pool of also-rans. Schools “cool-out” the doomed by convincing them that, according to a fair and just system, they do not have what it takes to achieve a comfortable life and thus deserve to remain mired in the dregs of wagedom. Moreover, while students from wealthy districts will not likely suffer greatly when they graduate in the bottom half of their classes or score below the 50th percentile on the SAT, the success of all those fortunate children comes at the expense of children from other schools, in other communities, where academic achievement is rarely enough to help them escape the meaty consequences of poverty. Nonetheless, the nation remains faithfully devoted to the promise of the educational ladder. The mere perception of opportunity is all that is required to keep the game alive.

During the last decade there has been great concern over the incidence of students, and even teachers, cheating on tests. We can anticipate this from teachers when we tell them that their ability to keep their jobs and feed their families depends upon test scores. We should also expect cheating from students when we tell them that their success or failure in school will determine the quality of their future, where they will go to college and what kind of job they will be able to get. Every year wealthy parents give their children competitive advantages by spending thousands, even tens of thousands, of dollars on tutors and test-preparation materials proven to boost grades, SAT scores, and chances for admission to prestigious universities. Academic achievement allows the breath of hope to seep into the economic sorting machine of society. “Cheating” is a logical consequence of a permanent underclass determined to scratch and claw its way out of the cellar.

In his Theodore Brame First Annual Lecture, titled “Education and Social Change,” Michael Harrington pointed out that economists had, during the 1960’s, developed an interesting theory: as more Americans earned college degrees, GNP rose alongside the national standard of living. College degrees meant that working-class Americans moved up to the middle class. So, throughout the 60’s and 70’s, more and more young men and women went to college and earned their
degrees. However, contrary to the economists’ forecast, GNP stopped rising. The nation, and the world, entered its greatest economic decline since the Great Depression. For the first time, Americans with Bachelor’s degrees were driving taxicabs.

Harrington argues that the recession privatized students. From 1971 to 2001, the Higher Education Research Institute identified marked shifts in students’ stated reasons for attending college. In 1971, the top three answers included: “to help others who are in difficulty,” “to become an authority in my field,” and “to keep up to date on politics.” By 2001, “being very well-off financially” topped the list. While the 60’s are lauded as a period of “democratization” for the universities, in the sense of providing access to previously marginalized groups such as women and minorities, the campuses of the 70’s had become colonized by a preponderance of aspiring bourgeois concerned with neither enlightenment nor social change, but instead securing credentials as access to future income. The job market disciplined students, compelling them to pursue a more narrow and instrumental brand of educational credential. Those students helped mold the universities into the image of the market.

In The Organization Man (1957), William Whyte, Jr. reported that by the early 1950’s, campus recruiters had narrowed their interest to graduates specializing in business, accounting, management, science, and engineering fields. Less than 15 percent expressed interest in Liberal Arts majors. College-to-job pressures to choose “degrees that work” intensified as students drifted away from the Humanities. Corporations, Whyte noted, had grown suspicious of the liberally educated young adult. Employers, as one recruiter put it,

like a pretty gregarious, active type. So we find that the best man is the one who’s had an 80 or 85 average in school and plenty of extracurricular activity. We see little use for the ‘brilliant’ introvert who might spend the rest of his life turning out essays on obscure portions of D.H. Lawrence’s letters.

Something about the philosophical study of the meaning of life and the nature of the good “unfit” young men and women for corporate America.

Since the Reagan Revolution, the market’s hold over education has intensified, re-investing each next generation with the old industrial ideology of a better life to be attained through economic growth and productivity. Our schools, in the *geist* of our larger culture, continue to operate on the faithful assumption that the roles made available by our current economy stand as the best means for achieving progress. According to this ideology, the Ohio Board of Regents recently stated the following as the most important questions for Ohio’s public universities: “Is schooling streamlined so as to get students out into the job world quickly? Do we have enough students graduating to meet the needs of the economy? Is higher education’s commercialization of scientific discoveries adequate for supporting the new economy?” Since Reagan’s time, politicians from both mainstream political
parties have ritually equated higher education with job preparation and spoken of college graduates as fuel for the national economy.\textsuperscript{11}

Today more young people than ever are attending college. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that from 1999 to 2009 total enrollment increased 38 percent, from 15 to 20 million.\textsuperscript{12} More than ever students conceive college as a means to competing for access to better, higher-paying jobs; and they are taking out unprecedented amounts of student loans to pay for their higher-than-ever tuition bills. Many of us have sold the content of our futures, that is, the creative and productive potential of our lives, simply to keep up with the pack. According to statistics gathered from the U.S. Department of Education, student debt has risen precipitously from $90 billion in 1999 to over $800 billion today and is soon expected to pass one trillion dollars. In 2010, the average student borrower carried $25 thousand in debt, although only half of all graduates found a job in their field within a year.\textsuperscript{13} Most of that money is owed to the major banks that recently claimed hundreds of billions in federal bailout money.\textsuperscript{14}

“College student loan debt has revived the spirit of indenture for a sizable proportion of contemporary Americans,” writes Jeffrey Williams. Debt “looms over the lives of those so contracted, binding individuals for a significant part of their future work lives.”\textsuperscript{15} In order to repay our loans so that we may avoid debtors’ prison—currently operating in one-third of U.S. states—many of us end up selling our loyalty, conscience, and dignity to the highest-bidding employer.\textsuperscript{16}

The Pornography of “Making It”

“\textit{Most people live a life which is little more than a series of quasi-official acts. Their conduct is a network of representations of the various codes and institutions of society. They act in such a way in order that some institutional or moral scripture may be fulfilled, rather than some deep personal direction of growth should be realized…The normal, or the common relation between society and the individual in any society that we know of is that the individual scarcely exists.}”

\textit{Randolph Bourne, circa 1916}\textsuperscript{17}

“\textit{During no other comparable length in your life will you make an effort of this magnitude on any project of your own…your life’s work is at stake…A work life controlled by others…your blood, sweat, and tears are going into work whose bottom line is enriching some corporation, serving the military or bolstering some elite…When the professional leaves unchallenged the moral authority of his employer to dictate the political content of his work, he surrenders his social existence, his control over the mark he makes on the world.}”

\textit{Jeff Schmidt, Disciplined Minds, 2000}\textsuperscript{18}
In honor of the 81st anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday, the Ohio State University invited Cornel West to speak at the Student Union. During a lead-in presentation of awards to a handful of accomplished African-American students, the emcee spoke to the achievements of each recipient, including summary statements of their program of study, grade point average, and future employment. The audience cheered after hearing that one student had just signed a contract to work for Merck, the giant pharmaceutical company; folks applauded after learning of another student’s impending position with Pratt Whitney, where the girl would soon be working as an engineer. These students had “made it” to the promised land of jobs with impressive titles and six-figure salaries.

West’s subsequent talk specifically decried the glorification of this type of achievement.

In Sermon-on-the-Mount fashion, West condemned our culture’s celebration of individual prestige and pecuniary success. Dr. King had no use for those things. His concern was rather for service to one’s community and contribution to the alleviation of suffering in the world. Perhaps these students’ jobs at Merck and Pratt Whitney would be of service to humanity, but perhaps not. The question was neither asked nor considered. West emphasized that there are far too many men and women willing to perform any task for an employer in exchange for wealth and status without first asking questions about how that task may affect others. Our culture is sick as long as it celebrates vulgar success, as it had that night, in direct hostility to the message of the man it was gathered to honor.

For most, life within a capitalist political economy is a relentless struggle to avoid starvation and destitution. Born into a competitive struggle to prostitute ourselves in exchange for the good things in life, many are seeking ways of escape. The ensuing contest of all against all brings out the worst in our human potential and betrays the tunnel-vision of our herd mentality: we are simultaneously buffalo stampeding headlong off the cliff and rats clawing desperately at each other to escape the sinking ship.

Consider two images in addition to those in the Adbusters magazine of the rats eating cake and the girl picking out ice cream. Picture a rat running in a wheel with a piece of cheese dangling in front of it. If rewarded with food, lab rats can be trained to perform a variety of exercises, including running on a wheel. Now imagine the ice cream girl sitting at an office cubicle. If she shows up to work on time, demonstrates the proper subordination to management, and executes the correct routines, she will be rewarded with money she can use to purchase ice cream or other commodities. Running the rat’s wheel allows her to satisfy her desires; each turn of that wheel simultaneously enlarges capital and increases its power over her.

Certainly this girl stays at her cubicle for the sake of survival. Without her paycheck she cannot secure the basic nutrition and shelter that keep her alive. Yet she remains a slave, a disposable
resource. If she is like most worker bees in our economy, she controls neither the contents nor purposes of her work. In this sense her life is not properly her own. She spends the best hours and energies of her years fulfilling the aims of an employing master. If she does not like this or cannot perform the work efficiently, a reserve army of the unemployed is lined up waiting to replace her. Thus her job insecurity, which is also food and shelter insecurity, develops into general anxiety, perhaps manifested as an addiction to food, shopping, soft or hard drugs.

Shopping, binge-eating, and light drug habits make our enslavement more tolerable; but most of us, if we had the choice, would seek to escape wagedom altogether so that we might re-assume possession of our lives. Accordingly we hope some day to own our own business, win the lottery, or achieve full professorship at a university that affords us intellectual autonomy. Many, but not all, desire the independence to manage their own life, complete with its loving, artistic, and productive potential. This was, after all, one of the central promises of the Western Enlightenment. However, the aperture for this sort of opportunity seems to be closing. As more folks than ever strive to make it out, the rat race quickens.

American culture views professional work as an escape from wagedom. Compared to wage-workers who lack any control whatsoever over the aims and contents of their work, professionals are thought to enjoy creative autonomy; and college is conceived as a stepping-stone from wagedom to professionalism. But what the typical American believes is wrong. In *Disciplined Minds* (2000), physicist Jeff Schmidt argues that autonomy in his profession is an illusion. Moreover, he suggests, it is an illusion for most of the 21 million Americans working in other professions. No matter what sort of work one does in a capitalist economy, it will be alienated work whose ultimate purpose is the expansion of capital. Only within that narrow boundary may one speak of autonomy.

Unlike wage-workers, professionals cannot be told precisely how to do their jobs. The nature of professional work requires a certain degree of flexibility and creative problem-solving. However, Schmidt writes, that flexibility and creativity must remain limited to the job’s technical aspects. Take, for example, the General Motors assembly-line worker whose job entails pulling a lever that drills a hole into a piece of sheet metal. The boss can tell this worker explicitly how the task is to be performed. In Taylorean fashion, her every movement can be calculated and prescribed down to the degree of angle and tenth of second. By contrast, consider the job of White House Press Secretary, Jay Carney. Carney is a professional who cannot be told explicitly what to do. The nature of his job requires flexibility and improvisation. Yet he is highly disciplined to operate within very narrow political parameters; i.e., he is vigilant never to say anything that might reflect poorly on the
Administration. The President chose Carney because of his demonstrated obedience and would quickly replace him should it lapse.

Schmidt’s experience comes from the world of Physics, both academic and professional; although, he says, both the academic and professional physicist are better considered employees of the military-industrial complex.\(^{22}\) Today nearly 100 thousand American physicists work for this industry and outside of it there is very little paying work. 99 percent of all funding for Physics research comes through only four sources: The U.S. Departments of Defense and Energy, the National Science Foundation, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The bulk of this funding is military-related: lasers, computers, weapons, &c. Professors who want to advance or simply maintain their careers, Schmidt tells us, must conform their research to this demand.\(^{23}\)

Most physicists, he continues, never challenge their benefactors’ ultimate goals or purposes. As scientists and citizens they are reduced to a purely instrumental role, offering no view or critique of what they should rightly contribute to society. Instead they internalize the priorities of the armaments industry as their own. As Schmidt sees it, graduate school functions as the gate-keeping institution ensuring that only those individuals willing to subordinate themselves in this way will graduate to the ranks of professional physicists. That is, the selection system of our universities tends to weed out candidates unwilling to obediently serve the interests of capital.

During the mid-1990’s, Charles Schwartz, professor of Physics at UC Berkeley, was denied a regular step pay increase after shifting his research focus from technical science to philosophical examination of the social role played by physicists. Colleagues disparaged him and academic journals refused his articles, claiming that he had “stopped doing physics and become an activist.”\(^{24}\) Few of Schwartz’s colleagues felt that the uses to which their “pure science” were put came within their professional and academic purview. That attitude falls into striking relief against the Nuremberg Court decision that the “pure science” conducted by Nazi medical researchers constituted crimes against humanity. After learning that his work had contributed to the invention of the atomic bomb, Albert Einstein genuflected that he would have served humanity better as a plumber.\(^{25}\) “I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagvad Gita,” remarked Robert Oppenheimer, scientific director of the Manhattan Project, after the detonation of the first nuclear warhead over Hiroshima. “Vishnu is trying to persuade the prince that he should do his duty. And to impress him takes on his multi-armed form and says, ‘Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.’ I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.”\(^{26}\)

Schmidt laments that the basic requirements for students in his department are defined in purely technical ways. A student cannot graduate without having first demonstrated her employability
to the weapons industry. But no student is required to understand the social purposes to which her knowledge will contribute.

Finally, Schmidt writes, the Physics profession is as baldly undemocratic as most other capitalist institutions, a hierarchical structure in which the vast majority of scientists work as under-laborers, performing narrow and isolated tasks that prevent most from grasping the larger goals to which their work contributes. Such is the problem for most of the country’s professionals. Their roles as cogs in the industrial machine are no less soul-crushing than those of wage-workers. Although professionals tend to be liberal in their popular political outlooks, many remain dogmatically reactionary when it comes to what really matters: democracy. Authoritarian visions of the workplace and larger industrial life prevail throughout most capitalist institutions.

In a 2009 speech to the plebe class of the West Point Military Academy, former Yale University president, William Deresiewicz, warned cadets of the pitfalls of success within bureaucratic institutions. He grieved that often, success goes to those most adept at climbing the greasy poles of hierarchy: men and women with talents for jumping through hoops, kissing up to superiors, and kicking down inferiors. Our universities, businesses, and branches of military service are full of these people, states Deresiewicz. This is “desperately wrong, and even dangerous,” because our institutions are rewarding and promoting the worst sorts. Instead of leaders we end up with men and women capable only of keeping a routine going, great at figuring out how to get things done but never stopping to consider whether those things are worth doing in the first place. Deresiewicz is by no means the first to proclaim the poverty of leadership within our major institutions. Retired CIA analyst Ray McGovern explains that honest men once ran the organization. President Harry Truman established the CIA in 1947 in order to centralize intelligence into one independent body. He wanted a place to go for straight answers, where informed people could tell him the truth without the manipulation of politics. “Telling it like it is,” says McGovern, was how the CIA operated during the bulk of his tenure, from the Kennedy through the Reagan years. Back then there was protection for telling the truth. However, during the 70’s and especially the 80’s, McGovern explains, sycophants and yes-men overran the organization. Bill Casey, director under Reagan, “saw a Soviet under every rock. Agents who came along and said, ‘wait a minute sir, I see two Soviets,’ became branch chiefs. Those who saw three Soviets became division chiefs. Those who saw none never advanced.” Ever since, McGovern claims, the CIA has been a mafia culture and the results for the country have been disastrous.

Our jobs are the arenas in which most of us spend the bulk of our lives’ creative and productive energies. We can imagine the ramifications of an undemocratic teaching profession as
analogous to a nation of physicists unable to control the human impact of their science. If professionals and wage-workers alike are no more than interchangeable parts of industry, it means that most of us make no significant impact at our deepest point of involvement with society; the average day consists in the reproduction, and often the intensification, of our own repression.

**Conclusion**

“When you were kids, you all admired the champion marble shooter, the fastest runner, the big league ballplayer, the toughest boxer. Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser. Americans play to win all the time. Because the very thought of losing is hateful to America.”

*General George Patton, 1944*11

“A study finds that seventy-six percent of high school students cheat on exams. Why? Because they have learnt to be part of a ceaseless pursuit of success. What a narrow dream in a short life it is to be successful.”

*Cornel West, Address to Whitman College, 2004*12

Something is the matter with our larger culture. We are trapped within a game whose rules we have not written, but which we mutually reinforce through the institutionalized habits of our daily lives. What I have been calling our capitalist political economy is an imposed, yet self-reinforcing mode of associated living that brings out the worst in us. In hopes of escaping wage-enslavement and amidst the desperate struggle for access to perceivedly-scarce commodities, economic life assumes a cutthroat character in which we do what we must to avoid losing. Accompanying this game of life is an atavistic ethos that keeps us collectively mired in a self-perpetuating rat race. In Sisyphean fashion, each step taken toward achieving a better life for ourselves strengthens and legitimizes our essentially anti-democratic condition. The same undemocratic criteria today constitute academic achievement in our schools.

Our scientific and technological heritage offers us the opportunity to enjoy a high quality of life while working considerably fewer hours. In order to reclaim our lives and cease living as serfs, we will have to figure out a way to rescue our institutions from the grip of capital and impose upon them a democratic ethic. This will entail subverting the rules of our competitive game as it now stands. We inherit a long and enduring history of resistance to the grim horizons of success and achievement offered through our capitalist culture. By standing on the shoulders of these giants, a new world comes into view.

2 Lummis, 35.


9 Whyte, 116.


11 For instance, President Obama has frequently stated that “Education is the economic issue of our time.” Barack Obama, in a speech delivered at the University of Texas at Austin (August 10, 2010), http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/08/09/remarks-president-higher-education-and-the-economy-university-texas-austin.


14 Jaffe, “Is the Near-Trillion-Dollar Student Loan Bubble about to Pop?”


17 Bourne, *The Radical Will*, 35.
The OSU Student Union is a recent campus addition for which students pay a fee of roughly $15 per quarter, although none were given any say over the decision to build it. Private commercial outfits occupy the bulk of its space.

See the description in Chapter Five, under the section heading, “Slaves to Desire.”

http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albert_Einstein

Robert Oppenheimer, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8H7Jibx-c0.

Schmidt, 172-173.


CHAPTER SEVEN:

A NEW WORLD AWAITS

Introduction

“Faced with the unsatisfactory and indeed politically motivated paradigms of explanation that have been insinuated into the mental fiber of modern capitalist society... what counterstrategy is available for the illumination of reality that does not in some subtle way replicate its ruling ideas, its dominant passions, and its enchantment of itself? As I see it, this question is both necessary and utopian. It is essential to pose the challenge, but it is utopian to believe that we can imagine our way out of our culture without acting on it in practical ways that alter its social infrastructure. For this reason, what I call negative criticism is all that is possible, apt, and demanded at the intellectual level.”

Michael Taussig, The Devil and Commodity Fetishism, 1980

The intellectual and cultural history of the West contains a rich tradition of resistance to the modern horizons of “success.” From its earliest days, authors and artists have critiqued the cruelty of capitalism and the hollowness of bourgeois culture. Today, with varying degrees of articulateness, students are rejecting academic achievement for many of the same reasons. The ethos of work that now dominates school and society contradicts profoundly the cult of leisure that pervaded the classical world. Although there was a time when the Calvinist work ethic contributed to the material and spiritual uplift of humanity, that time has passed. Our cult of work now animates a zombie culture, in its social, material, and spiritual dimensions. To slay and bury that monster is to set free all the future.

Dissent

“The age of chivalry is gone.—That of sophists, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever.”

Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, 1790

“Our failure to educate [our children] for success was the one way in which we did not fail them—our one unambiguous success.”
Christopher Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 1991

“I cannot say that I am any more intelligent than my peers. I can attest that I am only the best at doing what I am told and working the system. Yet, here I stand, and I am supposed to be proud that I have completed this period of indoctrination. I will leave in the fall to go on to the next phase expected of me, in order to receive a paper document that certifies that I am capable of work. But I contest that I am a human being, a thinker, an adventurer—not a worker. A worker is someone who is trapped within repetition—a slave of the system set up before him. But now, I have successfully shown that I was the best slave. I did what I was told to the extreme…I have no clue about what I want to do with my life; I have no interests because I saw every subject of study as work, and I excelled at every subject just for the purpose of excelling, not learning. And quite frankly, now I’m scared…And now here I am in a world guided by fear, a world suppressing the uniqueness that lies inside each of us, a world where we can either acquiesce to the inhuman nonsense of corporatism and materialism or insist on change.”

Erica Goldson, “Here I Stand,” Coxsackie-Athens High School Valedictorian Speech, 2010

As we know it, the modern concept of success came into use during the early-19th century in Western Europe, after monarchies had begun to fall and capitalism had permeated the fabric of society.

Success has had its detractors ever since. Also taking the form of resistance to academic achievement, this dissent represents a challenge to the constitutive rules and structures of our political economy and hints the way toward the collective reconstruction of a more democratic life.

In the parlance of our times, “educational achievement” carries heavy undertones of modern, middle-class values. According to Marx, the bourgeoisie that arose in Europe during the early-19th century shed its traditional moral and ethical ecology in favor of a bureaucratic and commodity-based mode of relation. Capital, in the form of money, concealed the social nature of economic relationships. Drawn away from traditional community networks to new jobs in the cities, processes of material production ostensibly separated themselves from processes of social reproduction.

As early as the French Revolution, critics began pointing to the pitfalls of Adam Smith’s “cash nexus.” As Edmund Burke saw it, the market was creating a “spirit of money-jobbing and speculation” devoid of what had made its advent possible in the first place. Civilized society depends upon institutions and modes of behavior whose origins lie beyond commerce, Burke insisted.

Mentalities suited to success in the marketplace threatened social stability. Life functions became commodities and self-interest spread like a virus, causing men and women to see each other only as means to their own gratification. Capitalism unwittingly kicked away the foundations of culture upon which civilization depended.

During the early-19th century, the genre of literary Realism developed out of efforts to portray the emerging bourgeois society. In these authors’ works we find a world in which notions of success become detached from traditional moral and ethical valuations of life. The French writers Stendhal

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and Honore de Balzac depicted a form of cultural decline attendant to the eclipse of aristocratic society. According to Balzac, as prospects for social mobility improved in France, folks turned the time and energy they had once devoted to cultural and intellectual development toward jobs and moneymaking. The salons, which had formerly served as epicenters for the exchange of important ideas, became instead venues for gossip and social climbing. This was a culture that had become obsessed only with money and social status as defined by wealth. Honesty and virtue disappear from the lives of the authors’ characters.  

In his intensely psychological 1830 novel, *The Red and the Black*, Stendhal sought to encapsulate the bourgeois condition in his main character, Julien Sorel. Born into a working-class family, Sorel endeavors to climb the social ladder. Sadly, this aspiration ends up corrupting his life’s passions and commitments. After seeking and finally winning the affections of two aristocratic women, his desire for status compels him to control and subjugate those women as means to the ends of his ambitions. Toward the conclusion of the novel, he attempts to murder the lover who dared thwart his designs. He is tried in court, found guilty, and guillotined. For Stendhal, Sorel represents a great and novel dilemma in modern society: the prospect of winning power, position, and influence, albeit at the cost of love and honor.

Stendhal saw an early-19th-century French culture faced with losing its core values and meanings, its traditional moral, religious, and artistic valuations of life. *The Red and the Black*, subtitled *A Chronicle of 1830*, closes with Sorel’s rumination over how hollow his life had become and how impoverished his ideal of “doing well” for himself had really been. This novel and the entire literary genre with which it was associated were attempts by artists to describe reality, the world and its people as they actually and truly were. Thus far I have been speaking of the emergence of bourgeois culture and its criticisms in Europe. Although similar changes affected the United States, they did so within a unique context that produced distinctive middle-class values.

The American Dream of rising from rags to riches was once epitomized in the historical character of Benjamin Franklin. Young Ben Franklin is the prototypical *homo economicus*, singularly devoted to the pursuit of material success in life. Born into a family of modest means, Franklin disciplined his character into near-puritanical form, excising all distractions and vices, calculating efficiency and effectiveness into every hour of his days. By his 42nd birthday, Franklin had retired from a lucrative career in the printing industry. The rest of his life he devoted to noble leisure: philosophy, science, and diplomacy. Though Franklin’s character is admirable, its transportation into the industrial economy of the next century portended grave consequences.

It is important to recognize that Franklin lived in a time and place that knew not the large-scale industrial economies of the next century. Colonial-Era industry remained predominantly local in
nature, where daily business transactions tended to involve face-to-face interaction. That is, one most often knew with whom one was dealing and also where that person lived and slept at night. The virtue of such small-town economics was that business relationships remained part and parcel of the moral and ethical ecology of community life.

When doing business with one’s neighbors, despite whatever measure of success an individual might achieve, that individual remains socially and economically dependent upon the welfare and wellbeing of the entire community. Under these circumstances, the maintenance of personal reputation is vital to one’s livelihood. However, the new forms and scales of industry increasingly transcended local economies and their attendant moral and ethical ecologies. Individuals began to achieve success independent of, and frequently at the expense of, the success of their communities.11

In his novel, The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg (1899), Mark Twain wrote of a stranger who descends upon a “morally incorruptible” small town carrying a sack of gold coins. As Twain tells it, this gold presents to the town families the possibility of becoming sufficiently wealthy so as to escape economic interdependence with their neighbors.12 Tremendous individual wealth makes the maintenance of personal reputation an unnecessary burden. One could, if one wanted, live irresponsibly and despicably without suffering any of the traditional consequences.

Metaphorically, the stranger’s sack of gold represents the threat that 20th-century scales of economy posed to traditional ways of life. The new industry disconnected professional lives from moral and ethical dimensions of community, while at the same time leaving the culture invested with Franklin’s traditional valuation of the assiduous pursuit of success. Said differently, social and economic ambitions, for-all-practical-purposes, freed themselves from morality and ethics as they had previously been understood. In many ways this was a good thing. As Freud articulated, individuals have always felt a drive to escape from the suffocating confines of family and community. Modernity has certainly been a liberating force. Yet we are left to deal with the crooked used car salesman and ponzi schemer as distinctive cultural archetypes.

Student motivation, or lack thereof, stands among the preeminent topics of educational research today. Students could do well in school, but they are just not that into it. We have all known unmotivated and underachieving students, from the elementary school to the university, who are lazy and lacking in healthy work ethics. Perhaps these folks could benefit from a militaristic-style education that compels them to develop better attitudes and habits. Others, however, may have good reason not to be motivated to achieve and educators may do well to consider them inarticulate cultural critics who reject the horizons of academic achievement handed to them by school and society.13
It is a normative practice in American culture for a child to answer “nothing” to the parent’s question, “What did you learn in school today?” This is an instructed matter, something a child must learn as an appropriate answer to the question. How would a child learn this? Undoubtedly from the parents who return home from work every day tired and defeated, with nothing interesting to report. Children pick up on the fact that most of the jobs in our economy are dull and depressing. They understand that the hours between 9am and 5pm are when the spirit dies. Moreover, they sense that their schooling is preparing them to enter this soul-crushing workaday world.

Despite what detractors may say, American culture can be impressively self-critical. Critiques of the hollowness of modern life abound in the American film industry, including criticisms aimed at adolescence and the institution of the school. For example, suburban high school films such as The Breakfast Club (1985) and Ferris Bueller’s Day Off (1986) depict adolescents struggling against a banal and hollow bourgeois culture as heroes while adults and conformist students valuing narrow-minded academic achievement play the boobs and villains. As Robert Bulman points out in Hollywood Goes to High School (2005), movies that do not fit this cookie-cutter plot do not sell tickets. Audiences prefer stories whose heroes ultimately succeed in life by rejecting academic achievement and the culture of the success.14

Released with great acclaim in 1969, the The Graduate told the story of a prodigal son, played by Dustin Hoffman, who returns home from Berkeley, California as a college graduate, but rejects his inherited life horizons of wealth, status, and career success. There is a scene in which a family friend encourages Hoffman to go into the plastics business. The word “plastic” is symbolic, meaning inauthentic or false. The whole scheme of life’s value, meaning, and purpose exemplified by the older generation strikes Hoffman’s character as “plastic.” Following the family friend’s advice would amount to spiritual suicide.

The Graduate arrived on the heels of the world revolutions of the 1960’s, an era in which college students across the globe awoke and spoke out against the university’s complicity with capital’s war machine. Standing on the steps of U.C. Berkeley’s Sproul Hall in December of 1964, Mario Savio pronounced to the gathered crowd:

We have an autocracy which runs this university. It's managed. We asked the following: if President Kerr actually tried to get something more liberal out of the Regents in his telephone conversation, why didn't he make some public statement to that effect? And the answer we received—from a well-meaning liberal—was the following: He said, ‘Would you ever imagine the manager of a firm making a statement publicly in opposition to his board of directors?’ That's the answer! Now, I ask you to consider: if this is a firm, and if the Board of Regents are the board of directors, and if President Kerr in fact is the manager, then I'll tell you something: the faculty are a bunch of employees, and we're the raw material! But we're a bunch of raw material that don't mean to have any process upon us, don't mean to be made into any product, don't mean to end up being bought by some clients of the University, be
they the government, be they industry, be they organized labor, be they anyone! We're human beings!

[Wild applause from the crowd.]

There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part; you can't even passively take part, and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!15

Savio saw himself and his classmates as cogs in an academic-industrial machine. He attended a prestigious university where the next generation of America’s corporate bosses would earn their credentials. But Mario and others wanted no part in this. Instead they sought the sort of education that could help them understand and challenge the cruel stupidity of their world.

Charles Taylor writes that the promise of American progress established and widely accepted in the aftermath of WWII had been eclipsed by the late 60’s. “The notion,” he writes, “of a horizon to be attained by future greater production (as against social transformation) [came to] verge on the absurd.”16 That better future, it seemed, had already been built and its moral fuel exhausted. Something beyond established institutional forms would be needed to endow the future with meaning.

More recently, Office Space (1999) and Fight Club (1999) offered compelling critiques of life in capitalist America. Office Space, a Hollywood spinoff of the daily Dilbert cartoons, parodies the sorrow and banality of white collar work. Faced with a growing nihilistic psychosis regarding his life and career, the film’s protagonist heals himself by giving up entirely the idea of “being a good employee.” Similarly, Fight Club depicts the middle-class, workaday world as an empty and meaningless theater in which men and women spend at least eight hours of their days performing tasks in which they have absolutely no interest, in order only to make enough money to purchase things which they do not need and do not really want. “Our generation has had no great war,” writes author Chuck Palahniuk, “no great depression. Our war is spiritual. Our depression is our lives.”17 Fight Club’s hero breaks out of his macabre existence by blowing up his apartment together with all the material possessions he had wasted his life toiling to accumulate. Each of these films has attracted large audiences.18 Folks find humor in their stories because they are true, at least in some significant way. Americans take courage from characters who suggest that it might be possible to reject our society’s middling measures of success and create more vibrant and meaningful life horizons of our own. Still, many of us who instinctively reject the morbidity depicted in these stories habitually live it out in our daily lives at work and school, “under the illusion that [we] are contributing to a free society.”19

None of this is to say that lack of motivation to excel academically is an inherently good thing. As previously mentioned, some students may indeed be lazy and lack healthy work ethics. We
all know someone in our lives who could benefit from the discipline of the Marine Corps. Young people need structure in life. The challenge to educators is to recognize the difference between an unhealthy lack of motivation and students whose rejection of academic achievement offers insightful criticism, however inarticulate, of our culture’s impoverished horizons of success.

While curing the modern malaise lies beyond the purview of teachers and schools, education can help young boys and girls develop a more sophisticated articulation of the situation in which they find themselves; in essence, helping them discover the cultural waters of meaning into which they are born and the horizons of purpose which they inherit. This would entail a trained capacity to recognize some films and works of literature not simply as diversions, but as critical cultural texts whose worlds and characters are real, at least in some significant way.

As long as our educational institutions compel students and teachers to blindly pursue achievement in an educational rat race to the top without stopping to consider what is being achieved, and as long as faculty in our colleges of education continue to give courage and aid to the rhetoric of achievement for the sake of furthering their own careers, we will continue not only to fall short of, but actually to work against the sort of rigorous and robust education that we so badly need. Freeing education from the pornography of success will first require a wresting of the institution from the grip of capital’s Black Hand. The historical record evidences students, parents, and educators who have made tremendous strides toward accomplishing this. These folks have made a conceptual break from the modern cult of work and given at least equal attention to developing a capacity for the wise use of leisure. Leisure, Joseph Pieper insists, is the basis of culture. Only through leisure can we build a new world.

Work and Leisure, Beyond Ideology

“Immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous.”

Bertrand Russell, “In Praise of Idleness,” 1932

“Only in genuine leisure does a ‘gate to freedom’ open.”

Joseph Pieper, Leisure the Basis of Culture, 1952

“What I am proposing, in brief, is that the Work Ethic (find a Master to employ you for wages, or live in squalid poverty) is obsolete. A Work Esthetic will have to arise to replace this old Stone Age syndrome of the slave, the peasant, the serf, the prole, the wage-worker—the human labor-machine who is not fully a person but, as Marx said, ‘a tool, an automaton.’ Delivered from the role of things and robots, people will learn to become fully developed persons, in the sense of the Human Potential

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movement. They will not seek work out of economic necessity, but out of psychological necessity— as an outlet for their creative potential."

Robert Anton Wilson, The RICH Economy, 1980

January 8, 2012

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) think tank has issued a report stating that the solution to our current global economic crisis is for everyone to work fewer hours. If we all worked only 20 hours a week, writes Anna Coote, there would be plenty of jobs to go around, people could spend more time with their families, and we could dramatically curb excess consumption. Citing Germany and the Netherlands as examples, Coote states that shorter working hours can lead to a more successful economy. In his forthcoming book, How Much Is Enough? economist Robert Skidelsky points out that technological change will continue to reduce the number of workers needed to carry out production. “The civilized answer should be work-sharing,” he writes. “The government should legislate a maximum working week.” Contrary to mainstream economists’ obsession with growth, the most pressing question is how our already-tremendous wealth can be justly divided. Less work and more leisure, concludes the report, should be a right for everyone.

Following this year’s Phil Smith Lecture at the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society’s annual conference, debate broke out among the many gathered philosophers of education. The evident problem was that practicing schoolteachers take little interest in what we philosophers have to say. And obviously what we have to say is important for both students and the future health of our democracy. So why do they ignore us?

Ideas included finding more effective ways of disseminating our wisdom. Another suggested tailoring our work to better mesh with the peculiar logic of federal policy-makers. But the application of Occam’s Razor suggests the following: classroom teachers ignore us because they are overwhelmed. We academics are paid to spend our time, including what is essentially leisure time, reading and writing about educational philosophy. Most classroom teachers enjoy minimal leisure at best. They are worked beyond exhaustion and over-regimented by bureaucracy. Even if teachers had the leisure to philosophize about their work, few institutions would allow them the creative autonomy to integrate their ideas into practice.

If philosophers of education want to see their good ideas at work in schools, for the benefit of students and democracy, then we will have to extend to every teacher the opportunity to be a philosopher. This would entail working toward the liberation of teachers from regimentation and overwork; it would require the progressive extension to teachers of the leisure and creative autonomy necessary for intelligent and democratic living. Although this lies entirely within the realm of possibility, it extends far beyond most academics’ conceptual maps. “The reinvention of daily life,” wrote Bob Black, “means marching off the edge of our maps.” If we are serious about democracy, in our lifetime or our grandchildren’s, we will have to exorcise the cult of work.
The number one political issue on the minds of Americans today is jobs. Depression-level unemployment is driving millions into destitution. Voters clamor for politicians serving empty promises to create more jobs. So strong is the force of capitalist ideology that it prevents us from seeing that unemployment is no disease; rather it is the healthy and blissful functioning of an advanced technological society. Our jobs and work ethic are our sickness, atavistic syndromes of a bygone era. “The morality of work is the morality of slaves,” wrote Bertrand Russell in 1932, “and the modern world has no need of slavery.”

During World War I, Russell noticed that modern nations could continue to provide for their material necessities while devoting the bulk of their productive capacities to the waste of industrial war. By the virtue of 20th-century technology, only a small portion of a nation’s labor force could provide its entire population with the necessities of life. In 1932, Russell argued that the average working day needed consist in no more than four hours; none would starve and everyone could have a job. However, Russell noted, most English wage earners continued to believe that their labor should support the opulence of the Royal Family. Similarly today, the majority implicitly assents to having half the fruits of its labor siphoned off to support warfare and the splendor of our plutocracy.

In a sense, the ancient Greeks and Romans were wise to limit citizenship to their leisure class. Citizenship, together with voting rights, requires civic responsibility. One has to spend time talking to folks, studying the problems facing the polis, and debating their solutions. 2000 years ago, few men or women had time to do this. Production of basic necessities required to sustain civilization ate up nearly all of most people’s time and energies. Socrates noted that manual laborers made bad friends and citizens because they had no time to fulfill the duties of those roles. Democratic citizenship requires more than one’s infrequent and passing attention. Yet this is all that is left to anyone dominated by work and distracted by spectacle.

Young persons learn most from the examples set by their elders. They cannot learn to become participating members of a democratic polity by following the examples of their overworked and unleisurely parents and teachers. Democratic education and culture require that all citizens, particularly teachers, enjoy leisure. Leisure is not merely spare time. Neither is it a means of restoring our vigor so that we may return to productive labor. The ancients associated incapacity for leisure with sloth and illness. Leisure was the end to which work served as a means. “We are unleisurely in order to have leisure,” wrote Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics.

Deriving from the Greek skole, the modern word “school” translates literally into “leisure.” Skole once carried spiritual significance. Plato’s Academy was a religious cult devoted to the worship of divine leisure. Still at the height of the Middle Ages, laziness remained equated to an incapacity to put leisure to its proper use. The slothful person accepted work as an end in itself. By contrast,
our modern cultus devotes itself to the worship of labor and reduces leisure to a restorative in the interest of work. At their worst, the institutions of school and work disconnect humanity from its inborn drives to play, explore, and experiment. Along with the ideologies and mythologies of our capitalist society we learn to accept wage slavery as a natural and unassailable fact of modern life.

Throughout history the old leisure class has occasionally produced genius. Freed from the burden of toil, Descartes and Darwin remade the world. We can be assured, as Stephen Jay Gould believed, that “people of equal talent have lived and died in cotton fields and sweatshops.” It is now possible to extend leisure to everyone. No longer must the majority destroy its potential in the performance of alienated labor. Philosophy, art, and modern science are our birthright. If courageous enough to claim it, we might discover the untapped genius of our species.

During the 1980’s my high school constructed an experimental moon colony on the grounds of its campus: a series of connected pods that students and researchers used to simulate what it might be like to spend a week living away from Earth. Most students, including myself, accepted the endeavor as plausible. Even our teachers seemed to believe it. The Smithsonian and National Geographic magazines lining our classroom bookshelves spoke of imminent missions to Mars and other wonders to come. And why not? Two decades ago we had gone to the moon. Scientific research was pushing the envelope of the possible, or so it appeared.

Fast forward to the 2012 Republican primary elections. Newt Gingrich, intellectual confidante of futurist, Alvin Toffler, is virtually laughed out of the race when he promises to colonize the moon as America’s President. What has happened over the past 30 years to delegitimize space travel in the popular imagination? And where is all the cool stuff—the hoverboards, memory implants, and robotic housemaids—that we all once thought we would have by now?

As teenagers, my great grandparents first read about submarines, flying machines, and radios in Jules Verne and H.G. Wells novels. Within a generation folks were flying regularly across the country and purchasing televisions for their homes. Science fiction could hardly keep up with the pace of innovation.

Until about the year 1890 the fastest a human being had ever travelled was approximately 25 miles per hour. A Daimler engine in 1893 could propel someone at three times that speed. By 1969 astronauts reached 25 thousand miles per hour. Modern science had unleashed energies on an unprecedented scale. Projections of exponential increase had us reaching alien solar systems by the new millennium. Yet no one has gone faster since those astronauts in 1969. The futurists have been left in the lurch.

Marx and Engels believed that capitalism would push the rate of scientific innovation so fast and far as to destroy itself. Surplus value, the two argued, could only be extracted from living labor.
But competition forces capitalists to mechanize production, which, over time, reduces the rate of profit until it eventually bottoms out. If they were correct about this, then capitalists who shipped production to countries with sources of cheap labor would survive as those who poured money into researching and developing robots perished. If Marx and Engels’s theory of surplus value is correct, then their notion of capitalism as a fountainhead of scientific and technological progress becomes suspect.

The Cold War space race kept the promise of material progress alive after WWII. Big government projects such as Sputnik and the Apollo program marshaled tremendous resources to back lofty ambitions. But when the Soviet Union fell into the chasm of history, the American space program lost its *raison d’être*. NASA’s Space Shuttle program is now a thing of the past. Military weapons and surveillance programs are virtually all that remain of big government research. Rather than designing automated factories, our top science facilities are building predator drones.37 Instead of wearing high-tech shoes produced by robots we are now purchasing attractively-packaged sneakers sewn by slaves in Indonesia.

Facing the tyranny of quarterly profits, capitalist industry scuttles any research unlikely to generate immediate earnings. Pharmaceutical companies avoid large-scale research projects such as AIDS and cancer while proliferating a galaxy of profitable pills: Viagra, Prozac, and Ritalin. In the university we see the same fast-dollar imperative, professors engaged in a distended series of administrative and marketing tasks: drafting and approving new interdisciplinary majors, selling grant proposals and the image of knowledge production, which has itself become a commodity, guarded from the public in restricted-access databases. As a result scholars become retro-scholastics. Once-expected scientific and theoretical ratcheting such as genetics, psychoanalysis, or critical theory, have virtually ceased.

There is a popular saying that it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. Far from ending ideology, the collapse of the Soviet Union rendered the Western world ideologically committed, committed to the impossibility of alternative economies. Capitalist ideology convinces us of ongoing scientific and technological progress, evidenced by 3-D movies and gadgets like the iPhone. But information technologies have done little more than build linearly upon breakthroughs made decades ago at the Pentagon. Science-fiction movies such as *Avatar* present us with simulacra of progress, spectacles of the hyperreal, maps more realistic than any terrain. As consumer society watches its fictitious future unfold on the big screen, infrastructure crumbles and the planet’s climate spins wildly out of control.

Standing before the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900, Henry Adams had “his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new.” Modern science had
unleashed a new brand of supersensual energy: radium and the atom, things that no one could see but which wielded tremendous force. Nothing like it had existed since the Middle Ages, in the supersensual force of the Virgin, “by whose genius the stately monuments of superstition were built.”

Nearby the exposition loomed the Cathedral of Chartres, constructed by families of Masons over the course of some six hundred years. For twenty generations these families dedicated their lives to a project whose completion they would never live to see. “All the steam in the world,” wrote Adams, “could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres…Symbol or energy, the Virgin had acted as the greatest force the Western world ever felt, and had drawn man’s activities to herself more strongly than any other power, natural or supernatural, had ever done.”

What belief or superstition has humanity left to itself capable of marshaling the immense scales of energy required for enormous projects: tending to a deeply wounded ecosystem, inventing machines that will spell the “end of work?” The ideological spell of neoliberal capitalism traps the imagination in the measurable futility of the here and now. Yet in pockets of history over the course of millennia, demotic movements have borne dreams of a better world. Across the planet, this demotic spirit threatens to loosen the chains of bondage. Freedom from the looming threat of destitution and liberation from the tyranny of the profit imperative open the door to a new world.

Conclusion

“A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing.”

Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” 1891

A world revolution is taking place around us. Nearby and faraway workers and educators are taking charge of their businesses and schools, attempting to manage their own lives and carve democratic hope out of the ether. No longer must we live as the humble submissives of capital. No more is it necessary to allow our life’s potential to be stolen from us. On the horizon lies a democratic political economy in which all are protected from the threat of starvation and destitution, and in which art and science experience a new renaissance.

To the extent that they operate under the aegis of the State, our schools are neither “public” or “democratic.” In order for a school to be public it must be owned and operated by and for a public. In order for a school to be democratic it must be organized democratically with an eye toward educating democratic citizens. This means that those who are most directly affected by the institution—teachers, students, parents, and communities; not politicians and business leaders—
exercise decision-making authority regarding its organization, curriculum, daily operation, and ultimate aims and purposes. But the Black Hand of capital that seeks to own our schools, with the help of bought-and-paid-for federal and state governments, will never consent to that. As educators, stewards of the wisdom of the culture, we have a duty to resist our captors.

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1 Taussig, 7.
3 Lasch, 32.
5 David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1-34.
8 Ibid.
11 Carey McWilliams, “American Political Thought since the Civil War: Progressivism, Twain’s ‘The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg’” [mp3 audio lecture] (Haverford College, February 9, 2005), www.haverford.edu/pols/faculty/mcwilliams/pols268/.
20 I borrow the term “modern malaise” from Charles Taylor. Summarily, Taylor sees the modern, industrialized world as fostering three malaises: 1) individualism, 2) intensified instrumental reason.
(particularly troubling in regards to social relationships), and 3) loss of freedom. Together, these contribute to the “disenchantment” of the modern world. See Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*.

21 Pieper.
22 Russell.
23 Pieper, 51.
26 Black.
27 Russell.
28 Ibid.
29 Cited in Black.
32 Pieper, 70.
33 Ibid., 43.
35 Toffler has written books such as *Future Shock* (1970) and *The Third Wave* (1980), which speak of technological acceleration and “the end of work,” when automated machines will replace human laborers.
38 Ibid., 387.
39 Ibid., 388.
41 Again, there is a class bias operating here. Wealthy and middle-class schools are better protected from the reach of the State. For example, mandatory testing accounts for a much lesser portion of these schools’ daily concerns. More importantly though, money is literally a social relation of power. Poor and working-class teachers, students, and parents exercise less per-capita power over federal, state, and local government bodies. For-profit, market-based schools lacking democratic checks and balances exist in far greater numbers among the lower classes.
CHAPTER EIGHT:

DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS AND WORKPLACES

Introduction

“We have frequently printed the word Democracy, yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawakened, not withstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests out of which its syllables have come, from pen or tongue. It is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted.”

Walt Whitman, Democratic Vistas, 1871

“Authority patterns in non-governmental social relationships, in families, schools, economic organizations and the like…it stands to reason that if any aspect of social life can directly affect government it is the experiences with authority that men have in other spheres of life, especially those that mold their personalities and those to which they normally devote most of their lives.”


Received wisdom holds that large-scale democracy is impossible, and probably unwise; human beings simply lack the requisite ethical and intellectual tools. Fearing the herd stampede of the unruly mob, liberal political theorists have defined citizenship in narrow terms: staying informed, deliberating upon policies, and electing representatives. Our best hope for the Good Society, this tradition holds, is for elites to remain wise, just, and accountable. Yet these elites answer to the same masters that hold the working class in bondage. Those who seek to enrich themselves by the fruits of our labors steer the ship of the nation. Sensing its own impotence while each day watching the bad news roll in, of poverty, warfare, and sorrow, the demos retreats into apathy and cynicism. There is another tradition, however, that says we can lift our heads, straighten our spines, and become agents of history.

If a democratic society is at all possible, the education of its citizens will take place through direct participation in local, democratic institutions. Such an endeavor is not one that we must call up wholesale from our imaginations. Rather, we have at our disposal a rich history of citizens who have claimed ownership and responsibility for their education, at both school and work. In each case, these folks have rejected capital’s imposed horizons of achievement in order to create and pursue their own.
In three of the four schools described below, students, educators, and parents have forthrightly enlisted the school as a weapon in labor’s struggle for emancipation.

Elsewhere, men and women are challenging the inherited dogma of democracy’s incompatibility with modern industry. In horizontally-managed workplaces we find testament to the centuries-old philosophy that self-government in industry is capable of fostering democracy in the broader political sphere. Nevertheless, these institutions face gargantuan threat from the larger, autocratic economy. Our challenge is not only to cultivate engaged citizens within democratic schools and workplaces, but also to find a way to do so within existing institutions scientifically designed and operated to keep their charges divided and slavish.

**Cultivating Citizens in the Democratic Workplace**

“Only if the individual could become self-governing in the workplace, only if industry was organized on a participatory basis, could this training for servility be turned into training for democracy and the individual could gain the familiarity with democratic procedures and develop the necessary ‘democratic character’ for an effective system of large-scale democracy.”

*Carole Pateman, Participation and Democratic Theory, 1970*

Humans are not born good democrats. Democracy, just like anything else, comes with practice. We learn by doing. Yet one-quarter of the American workforce describes its workplace as a dictatorship. Few workers, even managers and executives, are capable of affecting the conditions and fundamental purposes of their jobs. Studies conducted over the past century report that a lack of opportunity to participate in decision-making at the workplace stunts one’s sense of political efficacy generally.

Genevieve Knupfer, in “Portrait of the Underdog” (1947), found many poor folk exhibiting “deeply ingrained habits of doing what one is told,” that carried over to civics and politics. “Fathers whose work gives them little autonomy, and who are controlled by others, exercising no control themselves,” wrote Stephen Cotgrove, “are found to be more aggressive and severe.”

Robert Blauner, in *Freedom and Alienation* (1964), described factory workers, constantly at the mercy of their bosses, growing cynical and apathetic, losing self-confidence, and becoming generally fearful. In sharp contrast, those who managed their own work exuded individuality and accepted robust duties of citizenship. Each of these studies supports the notion that work, the institution at which we spend the bulk of our time and energies, breeds distinct social and psychological character.

During the 19th century, Robert Owen described the primary evil of capitalist institutions as a failure to promote democratic attitudes and habits of mind. If folks could reconstruct their workplaces horizontally to give everyone an equal measure of control, Owen thought, then these institutions
would compel their members to develop the powers of listening, deliberation, and articulation, skills and habits that would then infect the larger society. Putting his idea to the test, Owen sponsored a cooperative cotton mill in New Lanark, where workers educated themselves in the practice of self-government. Although the experiment failed when capitalists gained control over the mill’s finances, it inspired a movement toward democratic industry that thrives to this day.\textsuperscript{10}

Critics have always charged that democratic businesses are doomed to fail. In addition to lacking capital, the workers could never maintain the discipline necessary for achieving the efficiency demanded by consumers. “[S]ome social relations simply cannot be conducted in a democratic manner, or can be so conducted only with the gravest dysfunctional consequences,” writes Harry Eckstein. “We have every reason to think that economic organizations cannot be organized in a truly democratic manner, at least not without consequences that no one wants.”\textsuperscript{11}

Meanwhile, advocates stress that only in an enterprise where each and every contributing member has an equal say and stake may one speak of discipline and efficiency. In Decision Making and Productivity (1958), Seymour Melman reported that democratically-managed auto plants in Britain had achieved impressive levels of efficiency, paid the highest wages in the industry, and succeeded in developing executive mentalities among the workers.\textsuperscript{12} P.G. Herbst described the operation of a worker-managed coalmine:

The group takes over complete responsibility for the total cycle of operations involved in mining at the coal face. No member of the group has a fixed work role. Instead, the men deploy themselves, depending on the requirements of the on-going group task. Within the limits of technology and safety requirements they are free to evolve their own way of organizing and carrying out their task. They are not subject to any external authority in this respect, nor is there within the group itself any member who takes over a formal directive leadership function…The income obtained is divided equally among the team members.\textsuperscript{13}

“[T]here is hardly a study in the entire literature,” writes Paul Blumberg, “which fails to demonstrate that satisfaction in work is enhanced or that other generally acknowledged beneficial consequences accrue from a genuine increase in workers’ decision making power. Such consistency of findings, I submit, is rare in social science.”\textsuperscript{14}

Cooperatives have also achieved success in the United States. Since the early-1970’s the San Francisco Bay Area has been a friendly home to the worker-managed shop. At the Cheeseboard, Rainbow Grocery, and Inkworks, for example, no worker becomes trapped in the same narrow tasks. All share in the responsibilities of cleaning toilets and mopping floors. Each has a turn at the cushier jobs. If a worker is particularly opposed to math, they are relieved of bookkeeping; if they enjoy interacting with customers, they spend more time on the shop floor. Rotation of duties prevents monotony. Most importantly, says the Cheeseboard’s Laura McNall, debate and decision-making in weekly and monthly councils has a profoundly socializing effect. Because your vote will affect your
life, you want very much to speak succinctly and articulately; because it will also affect your co-
workers’ lives, you feel a great responsibility to listen attentively. In this way, the calculative
rationality demanded by enterprise remains tied to the ethical responsibilities of community. The
success of one does not come at the expense of others.

At the same time, workers in democratic shops do not fear the sadistic boss who might fire
them for any or no reason at all. Hiring and firing decisions, the latter being a rarity, are made by vote
of the council. Although these workers do not become rich, their earnings and benefits packages are
unrivaled in their industries. Maternity leaves and annual vacations far exceed those of both private
and public-sector workers. Nevertheless, even the most successful worker cooperatives admit
seemingly-insurmountable limits to the democratic potential of modern industry.

The vast majority of worker cooperatives in America are small operations. They practice
direct democracy because their numbers allow it. As Tim Huet of the Arizmendi Association of
Cooperatives puts it, “The idea is not to expand until you take over the world; it is to do what you do
well and help your community.” But these businesses swim in an ocean of bigger sharks. The logic
of the capitalist market dictates that larger enterprises, able to sell at lower prices, eat up smaller ones
as in a game of Monopoly. If horizontally-organized shops grow in order to compete, they risk
becoming hierarchical and undemocratic. If they remain small, they must trust that the consumer will
keep them afloat. Capitalist ideology also holds that the consumer is sovereign. Corporate marketing
and advertising departments expose that idea as farce.

Following decades of intimate oppression under Francisco Franco, the Basques of Spain began
construction of the world’s largest experiment in democratic industry, the Mondragon Corporation. Mondragon distinguished itself in three primary ways: all workers would have a vote in how their
business was to be managed; all would share in profits and assume responsibility for losses; finally,
growth would always be subordinated to the health of the community. Today the corporation employs
85 thousand workers in more than 250 shops that deal in finance, manufacture, retail, and research,
collectively boasting over 21 billion Euros in assets. The economy includes its own credit unions,
schools, university, insurance, healthcare, and welfare systems. Mondragon workers take home
salaries at industry standards and spend most of their money at consumer cooperatives where profits
are reinvested into lowering the prices of goods.

While direct democracy is impossible at this scale, Mondragon has remained impressively
egalitarian and horizontal owing primarily to the relation of capital to labor. In place of the capitalist
dynamic in which managers exercise hiring and firing power over workers, Mondragon managers are
elected by the workers and understood to serve at the their pleasure. Because each has a stake in the
efficiency and success of the company, workers’ councils appoint managers, typically from amongst their own ranks, to oversee and coordinate production. Managers have no vote in the councils and are recallable at any time by majority vote. Rather than executives or boards of directors, workers’ councils decide what work shall consist in and how it shall be organized. Each shop elects its own representatives and, in addition, random selection ensures that each and every worker will serve on the council at least once during his or her career. Council-members have one vote and are recallable by majority vote of the shop. Still, experience has taught that Mondragon’s horizontal representative system tends to become unwieldy and increasingly undemocratic once a firm exceeds 500 members. As a matter of policy, operations growing beyond this number are split in half. Viability of the Mondragon model is now being tested elsewhere.

Over the past half century, Mondragon has served as a beacon in the struggle for the democratization of industry, with representatives travelling the world to help folks in other countries establish their own cooperatives. In Cleveland, Ohio, for example, Evergreen Cooperative Laundry, Ohio Cooperative Solar, and a host of affordable housing and urban agricultural outfits are building a semi-self-sufficient economy and growing at a rate of two businesses per year. Those who live and work in the area generally support the idea on both practical and ethical grounds. Gar Alperovitz, professor of Political Economy at the University of Maryland and founder of the Democracy Collaborative, believes that the success of this “evolutionary reconstructive” model here and elsewhere could present a long-term alternative to “revolution.” In the meantime, these experiments are changing the conversation about who should own the means of production. Whether they can defend themselves from capital’s onslaught remains to be seen.

In the early 1990’s, Argentina was hailed as the most vibrant economy in Latin America. But after a decade of neoliberal reform, involving massive privatization and deregulation, its economy collapsed. The country’s wealthiest banks literally absconded with their money, $40 billion, in the middle of the night. Unemployment rose to 60 percent and the country sank into a deep depression. Rather than sitting idly by, workers decided that they possessed the know-how to enter their old shops and factories, sweep away the cobwebs, and resume production under egalitarian premises: no bosses, equal pay, all decisions made by assembly, each worker having one vote. By the early-2000’s, 15 thousand Argentineans worked in occupied factories. Schools and clinics came under worker control.

Incensed at the takeovers, the former owners sent police to evict the workers. Armed with gardening tools, slingshots and marbles, and supported by thousands from their communities, many resisted. While some won legal recognition of ownership from the courts, most Argentines discovered that their ability to maintain a democratic enterprise depended upon support from a State apparatus...
frequently aligned with the capitalist class. Nowhere is the global capitalist regime more fearsome and entrenched than in the world’s largest economy, the United States.

A preponderance of the evidence suggests that democratically organized enterprises are unsuited to surviving our industrial jungle. Everywhere we see giant corporations, Starbucks, Target, Giant Eagle, &c., colonizing local economies and undercutting small businesses. By and large, consumers embrace the megacorps and their bottom lines. The establishment of worker cooperatives, limited in scale and dependent upon the loyalty of customers, cannot alone bring about the end of the wage system and the democratization of industry; neither can this be done by reducing the Wal-Marts of the world to rubble. The large corporations that feed off communities like parasites, which enslave their members and plunder their natural resources only to leave once they are tapped, nonetheless provide many of us with the comforts and necessities of life. Rather, it is the workers of those corporations who perform every ounce of the labor that moves the world.

The reconstruction of a democratic world entails carrying on the work of production that we already know and perform, yet at the same time organizing to unseat the bosses who would keep us in chains. Our corporate overlords fear democracy. They recognize, as Hegel did, that their power and possessions depend upon the labor of their slaves. Hence we see our masters emptying their treasuries to purchase lawyers and PR firms whose fear and misinformation campaigns design to prevent workers from the awareness that they are agents of history.

Working towards democratic industry entails subverting the rules and goals of our game of capitalist political economy. Rather than pursuing success according to our inherited criteria and horizons of achievement, fugitive players in the game would work to assume all duties and responsibilities of production, thereby making hierarchical structures of authority superfluous. The goal will be to show ourselves, and those who lay claim to our labor, that we do not need bosses to force us to work. Rather than striving to rise as individuals up the corporate ladder and out of our social class, we will educate ourselves to resist the strategies of divide and conquer institutionalized in our workplaces. Familiarizing ourselves with the tactics of management and union-busting law firms designed to keep us competing amongst ourselves, we will gain new awareness that each member of the working class ultimately shares the same fate.

Ultimately, a better world entails the replacement an economy of scarcity with one of abundance. Due to our tremendous technological inheritance, this is now a material possibility. An economy of abundance would allow us to put an end to the wage system and the practice of commodifying human beings and their labor. Work that does not satisfy basic needs would no longer be compulsory and the marketplace of competitive business firms seeking to devour each other would
recede into the dustbin of history. As we move in the direction of the ten-hour workweek and a profusion of leisure, the spiritual force of democracy’s solidarity and universality promises to carry us through the dark night of the present.  

Participation in self-managed, horizontal institutions, no matter how small or intimate, breeds a democratic character capable of infecting others. Throughout the country, workers who understand this are finding ways to practice democracy in living rooms, parks, and church basements, organizing themselves to render the bosses redundant and preparing to bring the class war to the shop floor. Elsewhere, educators are giving students a taste of what it means to perform the duties and responsibilities of democratic citizenship in the course of daily life.

Public and Democratic Schools

“In any case, democracy begins now. Just as it is not something that appears only ‘after the revolution,’ so also it is not something that appears after a period of political education. Of course, political education is vital, but the only truly effective education system for democracy is democracy—democratic action itself.”

C. Douglas Lummis, Radical Democracy, 1996

Back in 1903, John Dewey wrote that he could find few schools in the United States where teachers were actually engaged in deciding matters of curriculum and discipline. It seemed to him that everywhere external authorities, often moved by non-educational motives, dictated to teachers the most important educational decisions. These autocratic schools restricted intelligence and imprisoned the spirit. Dewey recognized that American schools were pushing the brightest minds out of the teaching profession by creating “conditions which no self-respecting intelligence likes to put up with…no opportunity for free and full play of their own vigor.”

More than 100 years later, schoolteachers level similar complaints. They report feeling unwelcome at decision-making tables and imprisoned within institutional regimes over which they can exercise only the slightest control. At the same time, overworked parents lack the opportunity to become sufficiently involved in their children’s formal education. Within this quagmire it is difficult to envision a realistic path toward democracy in education. Yet there is a history in our country of men and women claiming ownership of their schools and through them pursuing their own vital purposes.

Democratic education does not mean that teachers relinquish authority over students. It does mean, however, that “legitimate peripheral participation” in the daily reconstruction of democratic institutions be extended to the young. Akin to apprenticeship, students become competent members
of communities through practice. Below I offer four examples of schools, belonging to their publics, in which educators have achieved marked success inducting their pupils into institutionalized democratic lifeways.

The Gary Schools

“[Y]ou have to plough up your mind to understand this kind of a school. Certainly, I have never seen a place which more nearly permitted to seem real that old ideal of the joy of work which we imagine must have existed back in guild days. It may be left to the imagination what children trained in such a school are likely to have to say to the industrial society in which we live.”

Randolph Bourne, “Apprentices to the School,” 1917

Randolph Bourne is a specter haunting the intellectual world. His philosophy, the product of a genius’s struggle through the early-20th century, paints a grim picture of our modern condition. Born with a badly twisted face and misshapen ear, childhood tuberculosis added a hunch to Bourne’s spine and stunted his growth at a mere five feet. Edward Dahlberg wrote of him that, “[he] was such a cripple that… the peasant women crossed themselves when he passed.” As a result, during his adolescence and young adulthood, Bourne experienced that intense social isolation that, combined with a powerful intellect, so often leads to fresh and brilliant insight. He would later enter Columbia University where he studied under John Dewey, Charles Beard, and Franz Boaz, connections that helped earn him a post as educational editor for The New Republic from 1914-1916. His 1916 report on the Gary, Indiana schools offers an exemplary portrait of what a truly public school today might look like and what role it may play in carving democratic lifeways into our venomous industrial jungle. First, however, I want to devote some attention to the development of Bourne’s philosophy, and the lens through which he studied education.

At the age of 18, Bourne took his first job with a neighbor who had invented a machine that cut perforations into music-rolls for the new player pianos. Publishing the experience in an article titled, “What Is Exploitation?” Bourne remarked that this was his very first encounter with industry and that it fixed the terms in which he interpreted the world. He begins by recalling how his employer would prophetically emphasize that only skill and industry determined a man’s prosperity in this world.

Despite earning 15 cents per roll, the employer paid Bourne only five. And, while Bourne toiled at his station, the employer sat in the next room composing music on his piano. Soon, as Bourne’s skill and speed improved, his wage was cut to four and a half cents. He complained that he
was certainly worth more, to which the employer retorted that he was free to leave and seek work elsewhere. Bourne “cravenly” slunk back to his workstation and, when the boss built another machine and sought another employee to operate it, Bourne meekly suggested to an old friend that he apply.

The experience became Bourne’s microcosmic vision of the industrial capitalist system. There would always be a surplus of labor and labor’s relation to capital would always increase capital’s power to exploit workers. Nevertheless, the bosses maintained that labor wields just as much power as capital: one worker to one boss, all men on equal footing. These folks saw the world only in terms of discrete individuals, never wealth, class, or social power. But exploitation is not personal, Bourne insisted; it is inherent to a system that few fully understand and for which no individual is to blame. Those who refuse to name this system serve as its “efficient and loyal” officers.

Well into the year 1916, Bourne’s writings exude a confidence that some class force would rise to rectify economic injustice. It was not the adults, but the youth generation that stood to reject the vices of its inherited society. Members of the older generation, set in their beliefs, would resist the gestalt conceptual shift demanded by revolution. Looking to the Gary, Indiana Public Schools, modeled on Dewey’s Chicago Lab School and led by Dewey’s student, William Wirt, Bourne saw an institution capable of “train[ing] a labor citizenry so versatile and intelligent as to be able to protect itself from exploitation and the hazards of our social shiftlessness.”

The Gary schools promised to infuse the home, workplace, and larger society with democratic mentalities and habits of associated living. In contrast to traditional schools that made children into appendages to industrial machinery, the Gary curriculum adapted to students’ needs, interweaving work, study, and community while laying the rudiments of vocation. “This school idea,” he wrote in regard to Wirt, “I really believe is the biggest thing in the country today.”

Just as Dewey lamented the sharp modern division between schooling and children’s play, Bourne scorned the disconnection of work from education. “Just as education and play should be scarcely separable for the little child,” he wrote, “so education and work should be scarcely separable for the adult.” Formal institutions make these unnecessary distinctions with grave consequences. As human beings learn most by living, school should be the place where the student can best live, a venue for experiencing and testing the world. Yet, in his estimation, most schools resembled penitentiaries, reformatories, and asylums, rather than “free and joyous communities.”

In an essay titled “Learning Out of School,” Bourne wrote that his moral rather than intellectual prowess earned him “marks” as a student. That is, he was not necessarily more brilliant than other boys and girls, just more dutiful and obedient. This sort of school, he admitted, taught him very little about the ways of the world. Lessons were never woven into his life experience in any meaningful way. Teachers drilled facts and figures into him with no undergirding framework or
“Nine years seems an unconscionable time to spend learning these simple things," he reflected.  

The traditional school betrayed a distinct ruling-class bias, Bourne thought. Its curriculum consisted mostly in the sort of book-learning that was the badge of the old leisure class. Parents who identified with that class and wished to see their children “rise in the world” therefore supported it. However, this came as a detriment to the great majority of workers, as it tended to reward the docile and unquestioning students and thereby prepare them for an uncritical role in society. Bourne never blamed teachers who wielded only the slightest authority over curriculum and pedagogy. Students, it seemed to him, did not blame them either. Rather, pupils displayed “good-humored tolerance….They seemed to like the teacher and recognize fully his good intentions,” he wrote after returning to visit his old high school. “[T]heir attitude was a delightful one of all making the best of a bad bargain, and cooperating loyally with him in slowly putting the hour out of its agony.”

Bourne’s essays took to task the educational “experts” who devoted their careers to tinkering around the edges of a carceral institution without ever questioning its foundations. At his high school he took notice of the students lined up uniformly in their desks, prevented from communicating with each other, a structure that seemed to give away the basic premise of the institution, not to serve the interests of the students, but to train them as interchangeable units of production:

In this incorrigibly social atmosphere, with all the personal influences playing around, they were supposed to be, not a network or a group, but a collection of things, in relation only with the teacher. These children were spending the sunniest hours of their whole lives, five days a week, in preparing themselves, I assume by the acquisition of knowledge, to take their places in a modern world if industry, ideas and business….Hand-educated children have had to go the way of hand-made buttons. Children have had to be massed together into a schoolroom just as cotton looms have had to be massed together into a factory….Is it not very curious that we spend so much time on the practice and methods of teaching, and never criticize the very framework itself? Call this thing that goes on in the modern schoolroom schooling if you like. Only don’t call it education.

Elsewhere Bourne found schools that inspired him. “Learning here is as natural as eating,” he said of a Greenwich, Connecticut school. “One learns when one is hungry to understand the world.” But the Gary, Indiana schools, under the leadership of superintendent Wirt, became Bourne’s exemplar of a democratic institution belonging to an intelligent working class. “Compared to the educational genius of Wirt,” he commented, “Madame Montessori is only a beginner.”

The population of Gary, Indiana grew up quickly after 1906 when the U.S. Steel Corporation built there the country’s largest steel mill outside of Pittsburgh. Within only eight years, the population had soared from three hundred to 30 thousand. Those who flocked to Gary for jobs were mostly poor and landless immigrants. Because U.S. Steel invested so little into the local schools, they were able to
grow as truly public institutions free from the company’s dominion. Working with a virginal institution that lived entirely off public revenue, Wirt did not have to overcome the many stupidities of the traditional school.

Wirt insisted upon two fixed principles for the schools in Gary. First, they were to keep children busy all day with work, study, and play. By offering superior opportunities and conditions, the schools would save kids from the mis-education of the streets. Second, all facilities of the entire community would be enlisted and integrated. By sending the children to learn in various parts of the community, no part of the poor town’s infrastructure would be overloaded at any one time. Although desks and seats existed for only one-quarter of the children, only one-quarter were ever seated at any given time. By taking full advantage of the town’s resources, the school lavishly provided students with playgrounds, gymnasiums, swimming pools, libraries, and conservatories. Frequent movement between venues seemed to quell most of the youthful energy that tends to disrupt those classes in which children are forever chained to their desks. “The point is,” Bourne noted, “that only in a free and varied school like this can one talk of effective discipline.”

Upon his first visit, Bourne remarked that the Gary schools seemed not to be compulsory. Students attended because what they could do there was infinitely more interesting than what they could do outside of it. Being sent home truly was a punishment and therefore little concern was had for “mischievous and unruly boys.” The schools brought art museums into their doors. They featured botanical gardens, small zoos, and shops for all manner of crafts and trades: carpentry, cabinet-making, painting, metal-smithing, printing, plumbing, and shoe-making. For instructors, they brought in local experts and professionals. Students learned plumbing, for example, by following master plumbers through the school as they made repairs, a variation on the old apprenticeship model. The buildings’ heating, lighting, and ventilating systems served as textbooks for the physics classes. “The school trains the child by letting him do the things the city does,” wrote Bourne. “His education is an acclimatization to the wider social life.” In chemistry classes, students tested the water and milk supplies, work actually necessary to the city.

What kind of a community we are going to have when any large proportion of the children grow up to observe and test the physical conditions under which they live…I leave up to the imagination. But it seemed to me that that chemistry class was one of the most important activities in the United States to-day.

Bourne understood the profound challenges presented by the modern world. The pre-industrial lifestyle had educated children in markedly different ways. This older environment forced men and women to become competent in the maintenance the basic aspects of daily life. By watching their parents, children learned the skills and instruments necessary for self-sufficiency. That sort of education ceased when work and school pulled the generations apart. Wirt understood this as well.
The 20th-century school, he said, “must do what the school, home, and small shop formerly did together.”

Thus he brought local mechanics, artisans, and tradesmen into the fold to double as teachers. Mixed-age groupings cast older students as sibling figures responsible for instructing their younger counterparts. In these ways, the Gary schools reproduced the self-sustaining educational environment of the pre-industrial household. Students even helped with the school’s accounting and bookkeeping. The idea was to enlist them in the responsibilities of operating and maintaining their own institutional lives.

What most inspired Bourne was the tangible sense that these schools belonged to their communities. Students studied history in a way that explained the present and exhibited a capacity for social introspection erstwhile lacking in American culture. “There is a charming communal self-consciousness about Gary,” Bourne remarked, “and this sort of history is the thing that feeds it.”

Unlike most that we know, the Gary schools stayed open day and night, nearly every day of the year. Bourne estimated that there were more adults taking classes in the evenings than children present during the days. “The evening schools of Gary resemble a people’s university,” he observed. “To Mr. Wirt the school is not more a community than the community is a school…The Gary schools seem almost as public as the streets…Veritable schools of the public.”

Wirt also worked teachers into the schools’ democratic philosophy. None was to work more than six hours a day and no work was to be taken home. Teachers were expected to enjoy the leisure required for civic duty; those who did not attend town hall meetings or become involved with public decision-making set poor examples for the children. Wirt also believed that democratic citizenship required individuals to exercise self-direction and responsibility in the professional aspect of their lives. Thus every teacher in the school was to have a say in major decisions and was to wield the power of initiative over what she taught. A pervasive scientific ethos encouraged teachers to experiment with new methods and lessons and none were tyrannized by rigid exam schedules and the pressures of passing along entire cohorts of students.

Dewey had taught Wirt that education must ultimately be self-directed. Students were thus compelled to exercise responsibility for their own learning. Teachers and principals trusted them to create individualized schedules and navigate the course of their days. In the classrooms, the idea was to acquaint the student with the purpose of her work. The child was “not taught,” wrote Bourne, “as an inferior who must take without question wisdom from immensely superior teachers, but as an equal and democratic citizen of his school community, learning wherever and whenever he can.” Teachers allowed current events and student interests to steer the course of study. “Not obedience but self-reliance,” Bourne reflected, “does such a school cultivate?” Rather than fitting the student for a
particular role in industry, this imparted the sort of versatility of skill and intelligence demanded by the modern world.

Next to Gary, Bourne studied districts where big business dominated the so-called public schools. Following the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, which provided federal funding for vocational education, many schools began, under the council of local businessmen, to train students in narrow job skills. These schools were bound to produce very different types of persons than those following the Gary plan. Narrow vocational education makes of the school, Bourne wrote,

a sort of kindergarten where the employer gets his workmen trained, free of cost to himself. It quite ignores any other roles the young worker may be called upon to play in society—as citizen or as member of an economic class… These plans are concerned with neither genuine educational interests nor with genuine industrial interests, but only with the interests of the employer. No person who feels that the public schools should train critical citizens who will have something to say to the industrial system into which they go, and not mere docile workers, counting socially no more than their tools, will fail to realize the vast importance that the Gary plan should prevail over all other schemes.59

In the tradition of Jane Addams, Bourne believed that schools should provide young men and women, about to enter the industrial jungle, with a sense of their history and of the nature of modern work, so that wherever they ended up, they could understand their place within the larger whole.60 At a minimum, this would give workers a fighting chance at combating the forces of their own exploitation. Bourne looked to the potential of a young generation, educated to face the circumstances into which they were born, to lead labor out of its bondage to capital. Rather than enlisting martyrs for its cause, labor’s most important work was the cultivation of its own intellectuals. This would be difficult to accomplish within most colleges and universities, dominated as they were by the ideology of the bourgeoisie.

Work People’s College

“This school recognizes the existence of class struggle in society, and its courses of study have been prepared so that industrially organized workers, both men and women, dissatisfied with conditions under our capitalist system, can more efficiently carry on an organized class struggle for the attainment of industrial demands, and realistically of a new social order.”

Announcement of Courses for Work People’s College, 1923-192461

Work People’s College, in Duluth, Minnesota, began in 1907 as a school for Finnish immigrants. Professing a socialist philosophy, it offered foreign-born parents a way to pass along their beliefs to children growing up within capitalist America. However, by the 1920’s an ideological rift between socialists and syndicalists expelled the former and focused the school upon the organization of a
radical working class. The labor organizers who became the college’s new directors had just survived a post-war wave of repressive State terror. Having read Sinclair’s *The Goose-Step* and *The Goslings*, they understood that a war was underway in the schools for the hearts and minds of the youth generation. Capital was overpowering labor and winning handily. Thus Work People’s College was to serve as the starting point of revolution by reclaiming education in order to build working-class consciousness.

Progressive-Era schools dominated by the Black Hand attempted to sever students from their immigrant and working-class families by instilling them with ruling-class ideology. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a feminist and radical labor activist, recounted the pro-capital stance taken by the schoolteachers of Lawrence, Massachusetts during the textile strike of 1912:

> Schools were directed to driving a wedge between the school children and their striking parents. Often children in such towns became ashamed of their foreign-born, foreign-speaking parents, their old-country ways, their accents, their foreign newspapers, and even their strike and mass picketing…some of the teachers called the strikers lazy, said they should go back to work or ‘back where they came from.’

In response, Flynn and “Big Bill” Haywood, Secretary-General of the IWW, organized “children’s meetings” in Lowell to counteract the schools’ teachings and build working-class solidarity. During the Patterson silk workers’ strike of 1913, after hearing teachers call their striking parents “good-for-nothing foreigners,” the students walked out of their classes.

Seeing how ordinary schools cut off working-class children from their own histories, director Fred Thompson focused the college’s curriculum on economics and the history of the labor movement. Reading lists included Marx’s *Das Capital*, Engels’ *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), and Lester Frank Ward’s *Dynamic Sociology* (1883, 1897). The school’s pedagogy was oriented to a non-hierarchical, egalitarian ethos. Students and teachers rejected the traditional classroom roles of a professing instructor and passive, recipient students. Thompson considered himself more of an “instigator” than purveyor of knowledge. Overall, the goal was to train subservience out of students by getting them to take active and leading roles in their own education, in general to depart from the structures and relationships characteristic of capitalist society. Thus the school rejected timed exams, competitive grades, and diplomas as reinforcements of an undemocratic division of labor.

What distinguished Work People’s College most clearly from the bourgeois university was that, instead of educating students to rise out of the working class, it strengthened them to challenge the class structure itself. If workers wanted to end the class war, it was understood, they would first have to abolish the classes. Toward this end, students practiced shop-floor organizing, debate, public speaking, and the arts of propaganda.
Enrollment in Work People’s College was never very large, peaking during the Roaring Twenties at 70 students and falling to 30 by the school’s last year, just prior to America’s entrance into WWII. The doors remained closed until 2006, when the Twin Cities branch of the IWW reopened it to offer free classes. Hundreds of organizers from around the world will gather there this summer to learn from each other and escalate the war for industrial democracy.

Freedom Schools

“The revolution is a need of being no longer alone, one man against another; it is an attempt to stand together and be afraid no longer…”

Ignazio Silone

In the summer of 1964, Civil Rights leaders organized Freedom Schools in an attempt to save the black children of Mississippi from being “intellectually and psychologically mutilated” by their so-called public schools. By virtue of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, most black teachers had been purged from the schools of the South. Critics charged white teachers with depriving black students of their own history and sending them out of class simply for asking questions about the Freedom Rides. Freedom School teachers reported that most students came out of their regular schools knowing about the work of Booker T. Washington, but having never heard of W.E.B. Du Bois. They were receiving an education in how to be “good Negroes,” to accept a subservient and inhuman role in the social order of Jim Crow South.

The first order of the Freedom Schools was to enjoin students in questioning their circumstances. Why did they live in dilapidated shacks with no indoor plumbing? Why were their schools and textbooks inferior to those of white students? The very act of questioning was an affront to subordination. Liz Fusco, a Freedom School participant, reported that most of the students still did not really know what it was that they hated about Mississippi. They felt that receiving only three dollars pay for ten hours’ work was unjust; and they knew that the police targeted and harassed them. Nonetheless they lacked a language with which to articulate and connect these things. The enemy remained amorphous.

Through a process of educare, or “drawing out,” teachers got students talking about working conditions in their communities: “What people hold what jobs? Why are your family members paid less than whites for the same work?” They asked students what they thought should be taught in schools. “In what should a proper education consist? What should we learn about the world, about jobs, history, and government? With this in mind, how good or bad should we rate the education we
are receiving in our schools?” Next teachers asked students to examine documents such as the Pledge of Allegiance and the Bill of Rights. “Do these documents apply to us? Why do our peaceful demonstrators go to jail? Why do the police turn fire hoses and sick dogs on us? What additional myths do we learn in school and what can these myths teach us about our world?” Through discussing these questions, students gained facility in articulating their circumstances and drawing connections between erstwhile disconnected phenomena.

At the same time, the Freedom Schools helped students to develop a sophisticated sense of the enemy, the “power structure” of Jim Crow society. “Who profits when Negroes are paid less than whites for the same work? Why does Northern industry continue to move its plants to Mississippi and hire Negro workers? What myths did you learn in school that help to perpetuate these practices?” Furthermore, “Why are the union organizers who come to Southern towns beaten, arrested, and even murdered by law enforcement? Who pays these police? Who gives them their orders? Why do police follow these orders?” By discussing these questions and placing them in the context of personal experience, students developed the concept of political power.

Students drew connections between the Mississippi power structure, the stories printed in the newspapers, and what was taught in their schools. Comparing the Freedom Schools with their regular schools, students developed a more sophisticated sense of what had been so sinister about their education. Similar to Work People’s College, the Freedom Schools developed in students an antipathy for “achievement” according to the criteria set by their oppressors. What the people of Mississippi needed was not personal success within a rotten social structure, but rather the re-creation of a new type of society. And so the Freedom Schools constantly emphasized the collective language of “we” as opposed to the individualistic language of “I.”

The “Citizenship Curriculum” developed by Noel Day focused on the power structure’s use of fear to maintain Jim Crow. Negroes feared being beaten and lynched for asserting themselves. They feared losing their jobs and homes when asking their bosses for equal pay. But fear pervaded the entire South. According to Day, the poor white man lived in constant fear of losing his job to the Negro who would accept a lower wage; and the power structure feared losing its big houses, luxurious cars, and foreign vacations should the social order be upset. By developing a language with which to articulate these fears, teachers and students grew brave enough to take action against injustice: sit-ins and boycotts; careful, considered, and meaningful actions through which to create a society free of fear.

Near the end of his life, Martin Luther King, Jr. became convinced that the whole issue of Civil Rights for all Americans was essentially economic. He died standing up for striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee who hoped to earn a living wage. Yet King was preceded in his
analysis by the Civil Rights activists who organized Mississippi’s Freedom schools. These men and women understood that the Southern power structure profited immensely from segregation and from the pitting of poor whites against poor blacks. Moreover, they understood that this power structure had colonized the schools in order to shackle the minds of young students, black and white, to ensure the reproduction of an economic caste system little better than slavery. Leaders of the Freedom Schools helped poor and working people to reclaim their education and escalate the bloody struggle for freedom.

Hegel insisted that emancipation cannot be won passively or granted by an external authority. For a hundred years following Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, conditions tantamount to slavery carried on throughout the American South, most pronouncedly in the state of Mississippi. During the 1950’s and 60’s, blacks and whites became willing to risk death in order to win freedom. Soon the bravery of those who died, the Medgar Evers and the Malcolm X’s, spread like wildfire into a world revolution. This is our history and legacy. If we are reluctant to claim ownership of our education, and willing to leave it to the Black Hand, we forfeit those heroes and the world they died to create.

Central Park East Secondary School

“Dear Debbie…I was riveted by your thoughtful mind. I always am, but I have one gripe. Every time I think I have captured the depth of your inquiring mind, I discover I am still too superficial. If I could, I’d like to be a student at CPESS and discover what learning really means.”

Arlene Silberman, to Deborah Meier, 1994

“If the example of CPESS proves anything, it proves that it still makes a difference—no matter how advanced the technology, no matter how sophisticated the fusions—for faculty and administrators to set an example: to be what they have learned themselves to be, and what they hope others will admire. Education has no choice but to be exemplary.”

David Bromwich, “Unsentimental Education,” 1994

The Central Park East Schools in New York City’s Spanish Harlem exhibit the intellectual sophistication and democratic attitude of one of America’s finest educators, Deborah Meier. Meier graduated from Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where she studied progressive education and the philosophy of John Dewey. She began teaching kindergarten in Chicago’s Southside schools in 1964 and described what she saw as being more like a prison than a democracy. Armies and assembly lines allow for more camaraderie, sociability, and dignity than did those schools, Meier
writes. As this so sharply contradicted everything she had learned about healthy education, she began to seek ways of implementing the ideal of a democratically organized school.\textsuperscript{81}

In 1985 Meier had the opportunity to co-found Central Park East Secondary High School (CPESS) along with Ted Sizer and a small cohort of teachers. By this time the national discussion about education had become narrowly focused on job preparation and competition in the global economy. Trends toward decentralization of schools and parent and teacher control had been effectively crushed. But CPESS was to be designed by the teachers who planned to teach in it; and they immediately dismissed the narrow goals of job preparation and global economic competition.

The idea was, Meier recounts, to think of students primarily as future members of a democracy and stewards of the Earth. Since they could not learn these responsibilities without seeing them exemplified by adults, CPESS teachers would have to exercise control over the aims and conditions of the schools where they worked. We are not born good democrats, Meier points out, and our culture offers few good examples to follow.\textsuperscript{82}

Meier invokes the Greek wisdom that civic leisure, time to discuss and debate the problems of society, is prerequisite to responsible citizenship.\textsuperscript{83} As depicted in Frederick Wiseman’s 1994 documentary film, High School II, one notices CPESS students, teachers, and principals spending lots of time discussing the challenges presented by the course of daily life. In many cases, older students are left free to discuss their lives away from adult supervision: personal relationships, fears, and current events are the frequent topics. One gets the idea that these small-group discussions are as educational, and exhibit as much sound philosophy, as the best courses at our top universities.

In the tradition of William Wirt, CPESS relies on inter-age groupings. Fights and disputes between younger students are resolved before a panel of older student mediators. The junior students are receptive to this panel and seem to take it more seriously than they would a disciplinary assistant principle. Moreover, the building aims for transparency by always remaining open to parents. CPESS is unique in keeping alive Wirt’s notion that the school must reproduce within itself many of the educational and community-building functions once the province of the family. In a particular scene we see Meier, along with two teachers, a student, her mother and brother, discussing how they will all handle the young girl’s responsibilities as both student and now mother of a newborn baby. A sense of warmth and community seems to pervade CPESS. Students are human beings more than they are test scores and disciplinary problems. Teachers are educators and model-citizens rather than police officers and bureaucratic functionaries.

Wiseman’s diorama view of the school shows students engaged in roundtable discussions of the American Dream, its myths and perversions. Elsewhere teachers engage students in educare regarding race relations in the city in the aftermath of the Rodney King beating. Collected together in
the same room, a dozen social studies and language arts teachers collaborate over curriculum and debate the best way of developing students’ writing abilities, all with the confidence that their input and decisions will matter. Across the building, in the library, thirty students gather nervously to plan a protest that night against police brutality.

Meier insists that test scores are a poor measure of educational success. Surveying her students and the environment in which they live, she points out that high test scores are the last thing that will increase civic engagement, lessen incarceration rates, and improve public health. One or two students rising out of poverty will do little to remedy the city’s sickening gap between wealthy and poor. Instead, Meier judges educational success by whether or not she sees a vibrant, egalitarian, and democratic culture. “Do students feel a sense of ownership and responsibility in their lives? Do they feel that they belong to some type of community and that their ideas really matter? Do they expect people to listen to them and treat them with respect?” Most importantly, “Are they capable of carrying on a critical dialogue and challenging society’s status quo?”

If students are going to decide what kind of world they want to live in, Meier says, they ought to be able to decide what kind of school and education they want. This capacity can best be nurtured, she believes, by combining the care of kindergarten with the autonomy and sophistication of a university doctoral program. In their final years, students choose internships and thesis topics that they will defend before a committee of teachers. While one student spends a day defending the philosophy of socialism, another explains what she learned during a semester internship with Lehman Brothers. In either case, Meier explains, the idea is that students engage and persist in interesting conversations, from class to class and person to person.

A successful student is one who has the knack for searching out new ideas and building on old ones, Meier tells us. This is perhaps the principal ingredient of a powerful democratic citizenry: the capacity to carry on conversations about the nature of society, its purposes and means of improvement. CPESS tries to inculcate this in students as a habit they cannot avoid, so that whatever topic arises in a conversation, they will have some interesting theory or curiosity to contribute. Strong citizens make connections and find things out. The underlying challenge for teachers is to turn kids on the power of ideas in their lives. Because every student is different, educators need creative freedom to figure out ways of accomplishing this.

Although Meier makes little mention of the class struggle between labor and capital, she has been engaged in the important work of democratically organizing schools so that they truly belong to a public that can then put them to whatever purpose it sees fit. Her idea is not to train workers, as so many schools are now forced to do, but rather to bring up democratic citizens capable of exercising responsible power over their social environment. While the SAT and standardized test scores of
CPESS students remain average for their SES cohort, 85-95 percent of graduating seniors go on to four-year colleges. Perhaps more importantly, Meier finds tangible evidence that the school’s graduates contribute to their communities by staying out of prison and fostering a vibrant civic life.86

**Conclusion**

“We do not learn to read or write, to ride or swim, by merely being told how to do it, but by doing it, so it is only by practicing popular government on a limited scale that the people will ever learn how to exercise it on a larger one.”

*John Stuart Mill*87

Democracy is not something that results at the end of a period of political education; neither will it be awaiting us after the revolution. If we want democracy in our lifetimes, or in our grandchildren’s lifetimes, we will have to begin now; not by running for office; not by donating to some campaign; but by making democracy a reality in our daily lives. This task is most difficult where it is most essential. In addition to deeply seated ideologies, more than a century of scientifically engineered institutional structures function to ensure that the workers of the world do not rise in rebellion against their corporate masters. We have at our disposal, however, a rich history of demotic energy, strategy, and victory. The task before us is to learn from these episodes and apply them to the context of our working lives by finding ways to stand together in solidarity and through direct action seize the political rights and decision-making power that we now collectively lack.

As workers and stewards of the wisdom of our culture, teachers are duty-bound to carry this fight to the schools: to organize and arm themselves, together with parents, students, and communities, to shatter the perverse racial, class, and value systems that threaten education.88 In the democratic school students would participate peripherally, yet legitimately, in the maintenance of their institution as well as the construction of the achievement profiles to which they will be held. This experience of being listened to and knowing that one’s thoughts and feelings will actually matter is the best encouragement and practice in beginning to think about what kind of world we want to live in and how the conduct of our daily lives might assist in bringing it about.

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Long ago, Thucydides described the Athenian demos as irrational and dangerous, eagerly sweeping demagogues into power. See Wolin, 247. More recently, James Madison wrote that “[Pure] democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security, or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives, as they have been violent in their deaths.” The Federalist, No. 10, Ed. Jacob Cooke (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 61.


Eckstein, 237.


Ibid.

There are some theoretical limitations to the Mondragon model into which I will not get. Mondragon continues to utilize the wage system, remains organized into industrially-competitive firms, and to a great extent operates according to the logic of the capitalist market. The very existence of the larger capitalist economy forces these characteristics upon any business. A more radical thought experiment would imagine production carried on without the wage system and the competitive market.


This is not to say that small businesses are necessarily, or frequently, democratic.

Union-busting has become a multi-billion dollar industry in America, comprised of more than 2500 lawyers and PR consultants. See Art Levine, “Union-Busting Confidential,” In These Times (September 24, 2007), http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/3326/unionbusting_confidential/. While “concerted activity” is officially protected under the 1935 Wagner Act, fines and penalties for noncompliance are sufficiently insignificant to render the laws null. For instance, the National Labor Relations Board has found companies such as Target and Jimmy Johns guilty of hundreds of violations carried out during recent anti-union pushes. See Steven Greenhouse, “Union Gets New Election at Target,” New York Times (May 21, 2012), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/22/business/new-union-vote-ordered-at-target-store-in-valley-stream-ny.html. Also see IWW Jimmy John’s Workers Union, “Federal Judge Finds Jimmy John’s Guilty of Illegal Firings,” Industrial Worker, Vol. 109, No. 5 (June, 2012).
I can offer one example of this. Union-busting PR firms habitually react to worker unionization efforts through fear and misinformation campaigns. Hauled in for mandatory meetings, workers are told what to expect if the union should be voted in, for example that the union has ulterior motives, will deduct outrageous sums from their paychecks, the store will have to close, and they will lose their jobs. Next the boss will talk about how he worked his way up through the corporate hierarchy to make his money and start his own business which is opening new locations and looking for hard-working and talented people to move into management positions. The script is fairly standard. Knowing what will be said, workers make a game out of the speech. With the expected lines and key phrases written down on a sheet of paper, they mark each one off through the course of the meeting until someone hears them all and shouts “Bingo!”

Pope John Paul II articulated solidarity as a tenet of Christianity: that it is essential to work toward the greater good of all, particularly the poor and disenfranchised. Solidarity helped to marshal and concentrate the tremendous energies required to liberate Poland from Soviet rule.

The potential of the workplace to educate us in our full civic capacities may ultimately be limited. For now, it seems that the primary task of citizenship is the democratization of industry so that we may collectively free up more leisure time. It makes practical sense to organize this at our workplaces, together with our colleagues and concealed from management. Winning additional leisure for ourselves would mean more liberty to create learning communities whose origins may lie outside of the workplace. Meanwhile, educators could help to develop solidarity in their classrooms and familiarize students with the notion of fugitive citizenship through games and literature.

Lummis, 37.


Edward Dahlberg, Alms for Oblivion (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), 80.


“Experience” is the key word here. Bourne’s experience at this job is what set him at odds with his liberal colleagues on the editorial board of the New Republic during WWI. Bourne saw these intellectuals serving as courtiers to the State, offering high-minded rationales for going to war. This was a betrayal of the poor and working classes who, after five minutes spent in the trenches, learned of war’s horror and the perfidy of its official rationale.

Ibid.


Ibid., 194-195.

Schlissel, xxx.

Bourne, Education and Living, vi-vii.

Ibid., 3.


Randolph Bourne, “In a Schoolroom,” in Education and Living, 41-42.

Ibid., 44-47.


Randolph Bourne, “The Natural School,” in Education and Living, 139-140.


Ibid., 138.

Bourne, The Gary Schools, 30.

Ibid., 125.


Bourne, The Gary Schools, 40.

Ibid., 41-48.


Bourne, Education and Living, 81-85, 120-121.

Bourne, The Gary Schools, 96-97, 152.

Ibid., 120.

Ibid., 143.


Bellah, et al., 152.


Altenbaugh.


“Work People’s College Announcement of Courses, 1923-1924.”

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Ibid.


Paul Lauter & Dan Perlstein, introduction to Radical Teacher, No. 40 (Fall, 1991).


Ibid., 38.


Ibid., 13.

Ibid., 16. Also Lauter & Perlstein, 4-5.

“Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum,” 14-16.

Fusco, 38-39.

Arlene Silberman, letter to Deborah Meier (September 8, 1994).


Meier, “What’s Democracy Got to Do with Teaching?” 21.


Ibid.


A number of experiments in teacher-run schools are carrying on throughout the country, from Boston, to Denver, Los Angeles, and elsewhere. The degree to which these schools are successful and/or democratic remains to be seen. Winnie Hu, “In a New Role, Teachers Move to Run Schools,” *NY Times* (September 6, 2010), http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/07/education/07teachers.html?pagewanted=all.
CONCLUSION:

FUGITIVE CITIZENS FOR DEMOCRACY

“Great men, great nations, have not been boasters and buffoons, but perceivers of the terror of life, and have armed themselves to face it.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Fate,” 1860

“It is not the law-breaker we must fear today so much as he who obeys the law… One of the most hopeful auguries for the future of this country, with the Permanent War Economy taking shape, is that we Americans have a long and honorable tradition of lawlessness and disrespect for authority. Only those who are willing to resist authority themselves when it conflicts too intolerably with their personal moral code, only they have the right to condemn the death-camp paymaster.”


Socrates is believed to have said that *parhesia*, or “plain speech,” “is the cause of my unpopularity.”

*Parhesia* is fearless speech, directed at waking folks from their uncritical sleepwalking. While unpopular, it is indispensable to democracy; often it hurts the worst for those it most helps. Without developing a language through which to articulate our circumstances, we cannot change the world for the better.

The circumstances we inhabit are strange and fearsome. Seen through the lenses of peoples distant and near, our capitalist political economy appears as a zombie, or slave culture, in which the majority assumes the role of beast of burden whose life purpose is to labor for the enlargement of capital. We spend our lives’ energies satisfying not the needs of the many, but instead our corporate masters’ hunger for profits. Yet we cannot overlook our own culpability in this situation. We allow ourselves to be enslaved by our frailties and desires. It was the early-20th century promise of material comfort and abundance that drew our ancestors away from the noble responsibilities of self-government. Today we are left with a conception of citizenship reducible to consumerism, spectatorship, and the 40-hour workweek.

In addition to staking total claim over the physical body, it is possible to enslave a people by robbing them of their land and means of subsistence. Although the Civil War largely erased chattel
slavery in the South, by the Progressive Era a majority of Americans faced the choice of either starving to death or selling themselves for a wage. We now remain dependent upon these masters who have dispossessed us of our collective heritage. Betraying our deeper mammalian inheritance, many of us have identified with our captors and adopted their purposes as our own. Suffering a mass epidemic of Stockholm Syndrome, our culture accepts the tyranny of wagedom as a natural fact of life no less than medieval cultures accepted the inevitability of serfdom. Perhaps the morality of wage slavery is sounder than that of chattel slavery; nonetheless it is a morality according to which we kill hundreds of thousands annually for the sake of Big Macs and Cadillacs and by which we allow millions to languish and die from poverty and hunger.

During the past two centuries modern science has shaped the workplace according to the same logics and disciplinary regimes with which it designed prisons and slave plantations. As far back as the 1700’s Giambatista Vico and Adam Smith understood the pragmatic maxim that “we are what we do.” That is, our personalities and characters are shaped by our ordinary employments. Who or what we become at work we carry home with us to our family and friends. Men and women daily operating as automata and appendages to production processes are bereft of the opportunity to practice the responsibilities and habits of mind requisite for participation in a self-governing democracy.

Although the school is commonly considered an institution for the training of future democratic citizens, it serves first and foremost a division of labor in the reproduction of our larger undemocratic political economy. Certainly there are wise and caring educators who make the best of this situation; but most are fighting with one or more hands tied behind their back. Politically and economically, throughout the course of American history, a plutocracy has sought to own and manage the school and through it aimed to train productive workers who will compete amongst each other while remaining sufficiently quiescent not to challenge society’s fundamental power relations. In order to accomplish this, the Black Hand has pushed curricula and achievement profiles across the country that instil students with the ideologies and mythologies of capitalism.

Principal among these myths is the idea that we can move toward a more just and egalitarian society by delivering the same quality education to every student. The fact is that our economy portends a differential distribution of jobs, incomes, and qualities of life. *Ipso-facto*, in their reproductive role, the schools also prefigure a disparity of educational opportunity and reward. Despite the weight and prevalence of countervailing evidence, there persists a meritocratic myth that there is room for all of us at the top of the pyramid. The mere perception of opportunity suffices to keep the game alive in all its depravity. Moreover, success in this game of all against all reinforces its perverse ethics. By struggling to escape the rat race, we cannot help but trap others below the deck of the sinking ship.
Prominently situated in capitalism’s mythology is the cultural horizon of progress via increased production. The ethic of producerism firmly established during WWII continues to offer the promise of a better future to be attained through economic growth. Intensifying our pursuit of this horizon through our coffee culture and cult of work, we fast approach exhaustion not only of the planet’s natural resources but also of our spirits.

Today a growing choir of voices rejects the central meanings and purposes which this culture affords us. Across the world folks are decrying the evils of capital and demanding democracy. We can only hope that their analyses are sound and their intentions pure. As Walter Lippmann said, “there is a great gap between the overthrow of authority and the creation of a substitute.”

Our cultural institutions offer few opportunities for experience in democratic living. It seems a great leap of faith to imagine subjects of the modern State, having lived only within autocratic, carceral institutions, spontaneously spawning democratic social forms.

Academics like to discuss the degree to which John Dewey’s ideas have been adopted in American schools; there also appears to be significant concern regarding whether or not those ideas were practicable in the first place. I hope to have demonstrated that Dewey’s philosophy has not been given a sufficient fighting chance. Democratic schooling requires a larger democratic political and economic environment in which to take hold. Such has not been the historical case in America. Rather, Deweyan education has been assimilated by capitalist society, appropriated for the children the elite.

For all its encumbrances, this Deweyan tradition has spawned a number of brilliant experiments in democratic education, schools actually belonging to their publics in which teachers have a legitimate say regarding the aims and purposes of their work. In the examples of the Freedom Schools and New York’s Central Park East Schools, students, parents, and teachers have rejected the aims and purposes imposed by their colonizers in order to create and pursue their own. Here educators have faithfully put to practice the maxim that democracy requires civic leisure: time to think, speak, and work together to build and maintain our society.

Still, democratic schooling will be pyrrhic if upon graduation students have no choice but to sell themselves into the wage market, in which great swaths of America’s poor and working classes experience each working day as a living nightmare from which they cannot awake. Here again Randy Bourne helps us a great deal. Bourne lived through a time that saw the modern capitalist economy assume mature unity with the American State. While sharing the analytic powers of his leisure-class colleagues, he brought to the table one vital conceptual tool that those others distinctly lacked: experience. Bourne insisted that one had to feel exploitation before one could understand it. The challenge to mastering the grim, meat hook realities of the new economy lay in unleashing the arts of
mind and language, theretofore shackled to the upper ranks of the class structure, to bear upon the daily pain and sorrow of the masses.

Richard Rorty argues that the genuine improvements our country has undergone in the past 30 years—less cruelty to blacks, gays, the handicapped, &c.—are largely the result of teachers who have used literature to help students understand humiliation. By reading the experiences of those who fought through Stonewall, Selma, and the Great Coalfield War, human beings find it more difficult to be cruel. Working-class literature can arm young people already within and about to enter the labor force with a language and logical grammar for making sense of the institution likely to dominate the rest of their lives.

More than a century ago the corporate State established itself as the supreme bio-survival unit of the species, our primary source of sustenance and protection from fear. Because most adults devote the majority of their time and energies to a job, the workplace presents itself as the most promising venue for the education of democracy: fugitive worker-citizens conspiring in revolt against their mother-figures, alchemically dissolving autocracy to resurrect horizontal structures of authority, where no single individual wields the power to dispossess another, where freely chosen and recallable councils delegate responsibility on the basis of willingness and ability, where no worker is denied the necessities and luxuries granted to another, and where those unable to work have their needs met as well.

This presents an uphill challenge at best, requiring ordinary folk to outsmart and ultimately overpower an enemy well entrenched and immensely strong. Demotic power lies in our great numbers and rich heritage of struggle. Should we some day realize the dream of economic democracy, we will show the world that we do not need a class of masters to force us to work. Carrying on production and providing for all, we will expose our present life of servitude for the barbarism that it is. Freed from mechanical toil, humanity will experience a new renaissance of politics, art, and science. Armed with the full potential of our species, we will leave planet Earth and populate the stars.

1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Fate,” in The Conduct of Life (Boston: Tincknor & Fields, 1860), 3.
4 Lippmann, Drift and Mastery, 126.

Again, Liberte Locke’s “My Body, My Rules: A Case for Rape and Domestic Violence Survivors Becoming Workplace Organizers,” is a gem in this department.
“You can go proudly. You are history. You are legend. You are the heroic example of democracy’s solidarity and universality.”

*La Pasionaria, in a speech to the International Brigades in Barcelona, 1938*
Many of those who experienced it describe Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War years of 1936-37 to be the closest thing to a democratic society that the world has yet witnessed. Spain’s first-ever democratic election saw an unprecedented outbreak of cooperative and worker-owned industry, in which nearly three-quarters of the Catalanian and Aragonian workforce, nearly two million men and women, became involved. Worker councils assumed responsibility for oil, shipping, heavy engineering, chemical, and textile industries. Motor factories continued producing automobiles without the help of bosses and capitalists. Men, women, and machinery previously employed in making luxury goods turned their efforts toward providing for the necessities of life. “Modernization was no longer feared,” explains Anthony Beevor, “because the workers controlled its effects.”

Virginia Cowles, a young American nurse who ventured to Spain to support the Republic, insisted that this war offered humanity a chance to defeat fascism before it engulfed the world. But as much as a battle between democracy and fascism, she believed, it was a war between the proletariat and the upper classes. Franco’s regime received as much aid from international capital, Texas Oil, General Motors, DuPont, and others, as from Hitler and Mussolini. President Roosevelt, capital’s most unrequited savior, imposed an embargo upon the Republic and threatened imprisonment to any Americans who came to its aid. Josephine Herbst, another young American to defy her President by joining the armed struggle, described herself and her comrades as “fighting not only against an enemy, but for some beyond.”

After joining with the International Brigades, George Orwell explained that beggars had disappeared from the streets of Barcelona because everyone was able get enough to eat. Familiar greetings replaced formal ones. Pimps were driven out of the brothels and cabarets. Waiters and shop hands looked customers in the eyes and the convention of tipping ceased as a measure of recognizing each workers’ equal contribution to society. “Up here in Aragon,” wrote Orwell,

one was among tens of thousands of people, mainly though not entirely of working-class origin, all living at the same level and mingling on terms of equality…Many of the normal motives of civilized life—snobbishness, money-grubbing, fear of the boss, etc.—had simply ceased to exist. The ordinary class-division of society had disappeared to an extent that is almost unthinkable in the money-tainted air of England; there was no one there except the peasants and ourselves, and no one owned anyone else as his master. Of course such a state of affairs could not last. It was simply a temporary and local phase in an enormous game that is being played over the whole surface of the earth. But it lasted long enough to have its effect upon anyone who experienced it. However much one cursed at the time, one realized afterwards that one had been in contact with something strange and valuable. One had been in a community where hope was more normal than apathy or cynicism, where the word ‘comrade’ stood for comradeship and not, as in most countries, for humbug. One had breathed the air of equality…the Spanish militias, while they lasted, were a sort of microcosm of a classless society…where no one was on the make, where there was a shortage of everything but no privilege and no boot-licking…I wish I could convey to you the atmosphere of that time.
Corners of time and the world such as these animate hopes that we may someday learn to live more wisely and harmoniously.

As Orwell pointed out, the grace of democratic Spain soon evaporated. Republican strongholds fell first to the Communists and again to the Fascists. The victories of dark and evil forces in these episodes inspire sublime rage. Let us cautiously embrace this rage as a measure of our spirit’s strength and a sign that our struggle is far from over.

2 Lippmann, *Public Opinion*.
3 Beevor, 110.
6 Ibid., 104-105.
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