



PROJECT MUSE®

Against Schooling: Education and Social Class

Stanley Aronowitz

Social Text, 79 (Volume 22, Number 2), Summer 2004, pp. 13-35 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/soc/summary/v022/22.2aronowitz.html>

**Stanley
Aronowitz**

The crisis in American education, on the one hand, announces the bankruptcy of progressive education and, on the other hand, presents a problem of immense difficulty because it has arisen under the conditions and in response to the demands of a mass society.
—Hannah Arendt, “Crisis in Education”

At the dawn of the new century no American institution is invested with a greater role to bring the young and their parents into the modernist regime than public schools. The common school is charged with the task of preparing children and youth for their dual responsibilities to the social order: citizenship and, more important, learning to labor. On the one hand, in the older curriculum on the road to citizenship in a democratic, secular society, schools are supposed to transmit the jewels of the Enlightenment, especially literature and science. On the other, students are to be prepared for the work world by means of a loose but definite stress on the redemptive value of work, the importance of family, and, of course, the imperative of love and loyalty to one's country. As to the Enlightenment's concept of citizenship, students are, at least putatively, encouraged to engage in independent, critical thinking.

But the socializing functions of schooling play to the opposite idea: children of the working and professional and middle classes are to be molded to the industrial and technological imperatives of contemporary society. Students learn science and mathematics not as a discourse of liberation from myth and religious superstition but as a series of algorithms, the mastery of which are presumed to improve the student's logical capacities, or with no aim other than fulfilling academic requirements. In most places the social studies do not emphasize the choices between authoritarian and democratic forms of social organization, or democratic values, particularly criticism and renewal, but offer instead bits of information that have little significance for the conduct of life. Perhaps the teaching and learning of world literature where some students are inspired by the power of the story to, in John Dewey's terms, “reconstruct” experience is a partial exception to the rule that for most students school is endured rather than experienced as a series of exciting explorations of self and society.¹

The corporate
factory, which
includes sites of
goods and
symbolic
production alike,
is perhaps the
nation's most
authoritarian
institution.

In the wake of these awesome tasks, fiscal exigency and a changing mission have combined to leave public education in the United States in a chronic state of crisis. For some the main issue is whether schools are failing to transmit the general intellectual culture, even to the most able students. What is at stake in this critique is the fate of America as a global model of civilization, particularly the condition of its democratic institutions and the citizens who are, in the final analysis, responsible for maintaining them. Of course, we may contend that the “global model” is fulfilled by the relentless anti-intellectual bias of schools and by a ruthless regime of the virtual expulsion of the most rebellious students, especially by secondary schools. Hannah Arendt goes so far as to ask whether we “love the world” and our children enough to devise an educational system capable of transmitting to them the salient cultural traditions. Other critics complain that schools are failing to fulfill the promise of equal opportunity for good jobs for working-class students, whether black, Latino, or white. Schools unwittingly reinforce the class bias of schooling by ignoring its content. The two positions, with respect both to their goals and to their implied educational philosophies, may not necessarily be contradictory, but their simultaneous enunciation produces, with exceptions to be discussed below, considerable tension for the American workplace, which has virtually no room for dissent. Individual or collective initiative is not sanctioned by management. The corporate factory, which includes sites of goods and symbolic production alike, is perhaps the nation’s most authoritarian institution. But any reasonable concept of democratic citizenship requires an individual who is able to discern knowledge from propaganda, is competent to choose among conflicting claims and programs, and is capable of actively participating in the affairs of the polity. Yet the political system offers few opportunities, beyond the ritual of voting, for active citizen participation.²

Even identifying the problem of why and how schools fail has proven to be controversial. For those who define mass education as a form of training for the contemporary workplace, the problem can be traced to the crisis of authority, particularly school authority. That some of the same educational analysts favor a curriculum that stresses critical thinking for a small number of students in a restricted number of sites is consistent with the dominant trends of schooling since the turn of the twenty-first century. In the quest to restore authority, conservative educational policy has forcefully caused schools to abandon, both rhetorically and practically, the so-called child-centered curriculum and pedagogy in favor of measures that not only hold students accountable for passing standardized tests and for a definite quantity of school knowledge—on penalty of being left back from promotion or expelled—but also impose performance-based criteria

on administrators and teachers. For example, in New York City the schools chancellor has issued “report cards” to principals and has threatened to fire those whose schools do not meet standards established by high-stakes tests. These tests are the antithesis of critical thought. Their precise object is to evaluate the student’s ability to imbibe and regurgitate information and to solve problems according to prescribed algorithms.

On the other side, the progressives—who misread John Dewey’s educational philosophy to mean that the past need not be studied too seriously—have offered little resistance to the gradual vocationalizing and dumbing down of the mass education curriculum. In fact, historically they were advocates of making the curriculum less formal, reducing requirements, and, on the basis of a degraded argument that children learn best by “doing,” promoting practical, work-oriented programs for high-school students. Curricular deformalization was often justified on interdisciplinary criteria, which resulted in watering down course content and deemphasizing writing. Most American high-school students, in the affluent as well as the “inner-city” districts, may write short papers that amount to book reviews and autobiographical essays, but most graduate without ever having to perform research and write a paper of considerable length. Moreover, since the late 1960s, in an attempt to make the study of history more “relevant” to students’ lives, students have not been required to memorize dates; they may learn the narratives but are often unable to place them in a specific chronological context. Similarly, economics has been eliminated in many schools or is taught as a “unit” of a general social studies course. And if philosophy is taught at all, it is construed in terms of “values clarification,” a kind of ethics in which students are assisted to discover and examine their own values.

That after more than a century of universal schooling the relationship between education and class has once more been thrust to the forefront is just one more signal of the crisis in American education. The educational Left, never strong on promoting intellectual knowledge as a substantive demand, clings to one of the crucial precepts of progressive educational philosophy: under the sign of egalitarianism, the idea that class deficits can be overcome by equalizing access to school opportunities without questioning what those opportunities have to do with genuine education. The access question has dominated higher education debates since the early 1970s; even conservatives who favor vouchers and other forms of public funding for private and parochial schools have justified privatizing instruction on access grounds.

The structure of schooling already embodies the class system of society, and, for this reason, the access debate misfires. To gain entrance into schools always entails placement into that system. “Equality of Opportu-

nity” for class mobility is the system’s tacit recognition that inequality is normative. In the system of mass education, schools are no longer constituted to transmit the Enlightenment intellectual traditions or the fundamental prerequisites of participatory citizenship, even for a substantial minority. While the acquisition of credentials conferred by schools remains an important prerequisite for many occupations, the conflation of schooling with education is mistaken. Schooling is surely a source of training both by its disciplinary regime and by its credentialing system. But schools do not transmit a “love for the world” or “for our children,” as Arendt suggests; contrary to their democratic pretensions, they teach conformity to the social, cultural, and occupational hierarchy. In our contemporary world they are not constituted to foster independent thought, let alone encourage independent action. School knowledge is not the only source of education for students, perhaps not even the most important source. Young people learn, for ill as well as good, from popular culture (especially music), from parents, and, perhaps most important, from their peers. Schools are the stand-in for “society,” the aggregation of individuals who, by contract or by coercion, are subject to governing authorities in return for which they may be admitted into the world albeit on the basis of different degrees of reward. To the extent that popular culture, parents, and peers signify solidarity and embody common dreams, they are the worlds of quasi communities that exert more influence on their members.

Access to What?

In the main, the critique of education has been directed to the question of access and its entailments, particularly the idea that greater access presumably opens up the gates to higher learning or to better jobs. Generally speaking, critical education analysis focuses on the degree to which schools are willing and able to open their doors to working-class students, coded in many cities as “black, Asian, and Latino” students, because through the mechanisms of differential access, schools are viewed as, perhaps, the principal reproductive institutions of economically and technologically advanced capitalist societies. With some exceptions, most critics of schooling have paid scant attention to school authority, the conditions for the accumulation of social capital—the intricate network of personal relations that articulate with occupational access—and to cultural capital, the accumulation of the signs, if not the substance, of the kinds of knowledge that are markers of distinction.³

The progressives assume that the heart of the class question is whether schooling provides working-class kids equality of opportunity to

acquire legitimate knowledge and marketable academic credentials. They have adduced overwhelming evidence that contradicts schooling's reigning doctrine: that despite class, race, or gender hierarchies in the economic and political system, public education provides every individual with the tools to overcome conditions of birth. In reality only about a quarter of people of working-class origin attain professional, technical, and managerial careers through the credentialing system. Many more obtain general diplomas, but as the saying goes, a high-school diploma and \$2 gets you a ride on the New York subway. The professional and technical credential implies that students have mastered specialized knowledge and acquired a set of skills associated with the speciality. They find occupational niches, but not at the top of their respective domains. Typically graduating from third-tier, nonresearch colleges and universities, they have not acquired knowledge connected with substantial intellectual work: theory, extensive writing, and independent research. Students leaving these institutions find jobs as line supervisors, computer technicians, teachers, nurses, social workers, and other niches in the social service professions.

A small number may join their better-educated colleagues in getting no-collar jobs, where “no collar”—Andrew Ross’s term—designates occupations that afford considerable work autonomy, such as computer design, which, although salaried, cannot be comfortably folded into the conventional division of manual and intellectual labor. That so-called social mobility was a product of the specific conditions of American economic development at a particular time—the first quarter of the twentieth century—and was due, principally, to the absence of an indigenous peasantry during the country’s industrial revolution and the forced confinement of millions of blacks to southern agricultural lands, which is conveniently forgotten or ignored by consensus opinion. Nor were the labor shortages provoked by World War II and the subsequent U.S. dominance of world capitalism until 1973 taken into account by the celebrants of mobility. Economic stagnation has afflicted the U.S. economy for more than three decades, and, despite the high-tech bubble of the 1990s, its position has deteriorated in the world market. Yet the mythology of mobility retains a powerful grip on the popular mind. That schooling makes credentials available to anyone regardless of rank or status forms one of the sturdy pillars of American ideology.⁴

In recent years the constitutional and legal assignment to the states and local communities of responsibility for public education has been undermined by what has been termed the “standards” movement that is today the prevailing national educational policy, enforced not so much by federal law—notwithstanding the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind program—as by political and ideological coercion. At the state

and district levels the invocation to “tough love” has attained widespread support. We are witnessing the abrogation, both in practice and in rhetoric, of the tradition of social promotion whereby students moved through the system without acquiring academic skills. Having proven unable to provide to most working-class kids the necessary educational experiences that qualify them for academic promotion, the standards movement, more than a decade after its installation, reveals its underlying content: it is the latest means of exclusion, whose success depends on placing the onus for failure to achieve academic credentials on the individual rather than the system. Although state departments of education frequently mandate the teaching of certain subjects and have established standards based on high-stakes tests applicable to all districts, everyone knows that districts with working-class majorities provide neither a curriculum and pedagogy, nor facilities that meet these standards, because, among other problems, they are chronically underfunded. The state aid formulas that, since the advent of conservative policy hegemony, reward those districts whose students perform well on high-stakes tests tend to be unequal. Performance-based aid policies mean that school districts where the affluent live get more than their share; they make up for state budget deficits by raising local property taxes and soliciting annual subventions from parents, measures not affordable by even the top layer of wage workers, or low-level salaried employees. The result is overcrowded classrooms, poor facilities, especially libraries, and underpaid, often poorly prepared teachers, an outcome of financially starved education schools in public universities.

Standards presuppose students’ prior possession of cultural capital—an acquisition that almost invariably entails having been reared in a professional or otherwise upper-class family. That, in the main, even the most privileged elementary and secondary schools are ill equipped to compensate for home backgrounds in which reading and writing are virtually absent has become a matter of indifference for school authorities. In this era of social Darwinism, poor school performance is likely to be coded as genetic deficit rather than being ascribed to social policy. Of course, the idea that working-class kids, whatever their gender, race, or ethnic backgrounds, were selected by evolution or by God to perform material rather than immaterial labor is not new; this view is as old as class-divided societies. But in an epoch in which the chances of obtaining a good working-class job have sharply declined, most kids face dire consequences if they don’t acquire the skills needed in the world of immaterial labor. Not only are 75 percent assigned to working-class jobs, but in the absence of a shrinking pool of unionized industrial jobs, which often pay more than some professions such as teaching and social work, they must accept low-

paying service-sector employment, enter the informal economy, or join the ranks of the chronically unemployed.

The rise of higher education since World War II has been seen by many as a repudiation of academic elitism. Do not the booming higher education enrollments validate the propositions of social mobility and democratic education? Not at all. Rather than constituting a sign of rising qualifications and widening opportunity, burgeoning college and university enrollments signify changing economic and political trends. The scientific and technical nature of our production and service sectors increasingly require qualified and credentialed workers (it would be a mistake to regard them as identical). Students who would have sought good factory jobs in the past now believe, with reason, they need credentials to qualify for a well-paying job. On the other hand, even as politicians and educators decry social promotion, and most high schools with working-class constituencies remain aging vats, mass higher education is, to a great extent, a holding pen: effectively masking unemployment and underemployment. This may account for its rapid expansion over the last thirty-five years of chronic economic stagnation, deindustrialization, and the proliferation of part-time and temporary jobs, largely in the low-paid service sectors. Consequently, working-class students are able, even encouraged, to enter universities and colleges at the bottom of the academic hierarchy—community colleges but also public four-year colleges—thus fulfilling the formal pledge of equal opportunity for class mobility even as most of these institutions suppress the intellectual content that would fulfill the mobility promise. But grade-point averages, which in the standards era depend as much as the Scholastic Aptitude Test on high-stakes testing, measure the acquired knowledge of students and restrict their access to elite institutions of higher learning, the obligatory training grounds for professional and managerial occupations. Since all credentials are not equal, graduating from third- and fourth-tier institutions does not confer on the successful candidate the prerequisites for entering a leading graduate school—the preparatory institution for professional and managerial occupations, or the most desirable entry-level service jobs that require only a bachelor’s degree.

Pierre Bourdieu argues that schools reproduce class relations by reinforcing rather than reducing class-based differential access to social and cultural capital, key markers of class affiliation and mobility. Children of the wealthy, professionals, and the intelligentsia, he argues, always already possess these forms of capital. Far from making possible a rich intellectual education, or providing the chance to affiliate with networks of students and faculty who have handles on better jobs, schooling habituates working-

Mass higher
education is, to a
great extent, a
holding pen:
effectively
masking
unemployment
and under-
employment.

class students, through mechanisms of discipline and punishment, to the bottom rungs of the work world or the academic world by subordinating or expelling them.⁵ Poorly prepared for academic work by their primary and secondary schools, and having few alternatives to acquiring some kind of credential, many who stay the course and graduate high school and third- and fourth-tier college inevitably confront a series of severely limited occupational choices—or none at all. Their life chances are just a cut above those who do not complete high school or college. Their school performances seem to validate what common sense has always suspected: given equal opportunity to attain school knowledge, the cream always rises to the top and those stuck at the bottom must be biologically impaired, victimized by the infamous “culture of poverty” or just plain distracted. That most working-class high-school and college students are obliged to hold full- or part-time jobs in order to stay in school fails to temper this judgment, for as is well known, preconceptions usually trump facts.⁶ Nor does the fact that the children of the recent 20 million immigrants from Latin America, Russia, and especially Asia speak their native languages at home, in the neighborhood, and to each other in school evoke more than hand-wringing from educational leaders. In this era of tight school budgets, English as a Second Language funds have been cut or eliminated at every level of schooling.

But Paul Willis insists that working-class kids get working-class jobs by means of their refusal to accept the discipline entailed in curricular mastery and by their rebellion against school authority. Challenging the familiar “socialization” thesis—of which Bourdieu’s is perhaps the most sophisticated version, according to which working-class kids “fail” because they are culturally deprived or, in the American critical version, are assaulted by the hidden curriculum and school pedagogy that subsumes kids under the prevailing order—Willis recodes kids’ failure as refusal of [school] work, which lands them in the world of factory or low-level service work. Willis offers no alternative educational model to schooling: his discovery functions as critique. Indeed, as Willis himself acknowledges, the school remains, in Louis Althusser’s famous phrase, the main “ideological state apparatus,” but working-class kids are not victims. Implicitly rejecting Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb’s notion that school failure is a “hidden injury” of class insofar as working-class kids internalize poor school performance as a sign of personal deficit, he argues that most early school leavers are active agents in the production of their own class position. While students’ antipathy to school authority is enacted at the site of the school, its origins are the working-class culture from which they spring. Workers do not like bosses, and kids do not like school bosses, the deans and principals, but often as well the teachers,

whose main job in the urban centers is to keep order. The source of working-class kids' education is not the school but the shop floor, the places where their parents work, the home, and the neighborhood.⁷

In the past half-century the class question has been inflected by race and gender discrimination, and, in the American way, the “race, gender, class” phrase implies that these domains are ontologically distinct, if not entirely separate. Nor have critics theorized the race and gender question as a class issue, but as an attribute of bioidentities. In fact, in the era of identity politics, for many writers class itself stands alongside race and gender as just another identity. Having made the easy, inaccurate judgment that white students—regardless of their class or gender—stand in a qualitatively different relation to school-related opportunities than blacks, class is often suppressed as a sign of exclusion. In privileging issues of access, not only is the curriculum presupposed, in which case Bourdieu's insistence on the concept of cultural capital is ignored, but also the entire question is elided of whether schooling may be conflated with education. Only rarely do writers examine other forms of education. In both the Marxist and liberal traditions, schooling is presumed to remain—over a vast spectrum of spatial and temporal situations—the theater within which life chances are determined.

Education and Immaterial Labor

Education may be defined as the collective and individual reflection on the totality of life experiences: what we learn from peers, parents (and the socially situated cultures of which they are a part), media, and schools. By reflection I mean the transformation of experience into a multitude of concepts that constitute the abstractions we call “knowledge.” Which of the forms of learning predominate are always configured historically. The exclusive focus by theorists and researchers on school knowledges—indeed, the implication that school is the principal site of what we mean by education—reflects the degree to which they have, themselves, internalized the equation of education with school knowledge and its preconditions. The key learning is they (we) have been habituated to a specific regime of intellectual labor that entails a high level of self-discipline, the acquisition of the skills of reading and writing, and the career expectations associated with professionalization.

To say this constitutes the self-reflection by intellectuals—in the broadest sense of the term—of their own relation to schooling. In the age of the decline of critical intelligence and the proliferation of technical intelligence, “intellectual” in its current connotation designates immaterial

labor, not traditional intellectual pursuits such as literature, philosophy, and art. Immaterial labor describes those who work not with objects or the administration of things and people, but with ideas, symbols, and signs. Some of the occupations grouped under immaterial labor have an affective dimension. The work demands the complete subordination of brain, emotion, and body to the task while requiring the worker to exercise considerable judgment and imagination in its performance. For example, at sites such as “new economy” private-sector software workplaces; some law firms that deal with questions of intellectual property, public interest, or constitutional and international law; research universities and independent research institutes; and small, innovative design, architectural, and engineering firms, the informality of the labor process, close collaborative relationships among members of task-oriented teams, and the overflow of the space of the shop floor with the spaces of home and play evoke, at times, a high level of exhilaration, even giddiness, among members, and at other times utter exhaustion and burnout because the work invades the dreamwork and prohibits relaxation and genuine attention to partners and children.

To be an immaterial worker means, in the interest of having self-generated work, surrendering much of one’s unfettered time. Such workers are obliged to sunder the conventional separation of work and leisure, to adopt the view that time devoted to creative, albeit commodified labor, is actually “free.” Or, to be more exact, even play must be engaged in as serious business. For many the golf course, the bar, the weekend at the beach are workplaces, where dreams are shared, plans formulated, and deals are made. Just as time becomes unified around work, so work loses its geographic specificity. As Andrew Ross shows in his pathbreaking ethnography of a New York new economy workplace during and after the dot-com boom, the headiness for the pioneers of this new work world was, tacitly, a function of the halcyon period of the computer software industry when everyone felt the sky was no longer the limit.⁸ When the economic crunch descended on thousands of workplaces, people were laid off, and those who remained, as well as those who became unemployed, experienced a heavy dose of market reality.

It may be argued that among elite students and institutions, schooling not only prepares immaterial labor by transmitting a bundle of legitimate knowledges; the diligent, academically successful student internalizes the blur between the classroom, play, and home by spending a great deal of time in the library or ostensibly playing at the computer. Thus the price of the promise of autonomy, a situation intrinsic to professional ideology, if not always its practice in the context of bureaucratic and hierarchical corporate systems, is to accept work as a mode of life; one lives to work,

rather than the reverse. The hopes and expectations of these strata are formed in the process of schooling; indeed, they have most completely assimilated the ideologies linked to school knowledge and to the credentials conferred by the system. Thus whether professional school people, educational researchers, or not, they tend to evaluate people by the criteria to which they, themselves, were subjected. If the child has not fully embraced work as life, he is consigned to the educational nether land. Even the egalitarians (better read *populists*) accept this regime: their object is to afford those for whom work is a necessary evil entry into the social world, where work is the mission.

The Labor and Radical Movements as Educational Sites

The working-class intellectual as a social type precedes and parallels the emergence of universal public education. At the dawn of the public-school movement in the 1830s, the antebellum labor movement, which consisted largely of literate skilled workers, favored six years of schooling in order to transmit to their children the basics of reading and writing, but opposed compulsory attendance in secondary schools. The reasons were bound up with their congenital suspicion of the state, which they believed never exhibited sympathy for the workers' cause. Although opposed to child labor, the early workers' movements were convinced that the substance of education—literature, history, philosophy—should be supplied by the movement itself. Consequently, in both the oral and the written tradition, workers' organizations often constituted an alternate university to that of public schools. The active program of many workers' and radical movements until World War II consisted largely in education through newspapers, literacy classes for immigrants where the reading materials were drawn from labor and socialist classics, and world literature. These were supplemented by lectures offered by independent scholars who toured the country in the employ of lecture organizations commissioned by the unions and radical organizations.⁹

But the shop floor was also a site of education. Skilled workers were usually literate in their own language and in English, and many were voracious readers and writers. Union and radical newspapers often ran poetry and stories written by workers. Socialist-led unions sponsored educational programs; in the era when the union contract was still a rarity, the union was not so much an agency of contract negotiation and enforcement as an educational, political, and social association. In his autobiography, Samuel Gompers, the founding American Federation of Labor president, remembers his fellow cigar makers hiring a “reader” in the 1870s, who sat at the

center of the shop floor and read from literary and historical classics as well as more contemporary works of political and economic analysis such as the writings of Marx and Engels. Reading groups met in the back of a bar, in the union hall, or in the local affiliate of the socialist wing of the nationality federations. Often these groups were ostensibly devoted to preparing immigrants to pass the obligatory language test for citizenship status. But the content of the reading was, in addition to labor and socialist newspapers and magazines, often supplemented by works of fiction by Shakespeare, the great nineteenth-century novelists and poets, and Karl Kautsky. In its anarchist inflection, Peter Kropotkin, Moses Hess, and Michael Bakunin were the required texts.¹⁰

In New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and other large cities where the Socialist, Anarchist, and Communist movements had considerable membership and a fairly substantial periphery of sympathizers, the parties established adult schools that not only offered courses pertaining to political and ideological knowledge but were vehicles for many working- and middle-class students to gain a general education. Among them, in New York, the socialist-oriented Rand School and the Communist-sponsored Jefferson School (formerly the Workers' School) lasted until the mid-1950s when, because of the decline of a Left intellectual culture among workers as much as the contemporary repressive political environment, they closed. But in their heydays, from the 1920s to the late 1940s, for tens of thousands of working-class people—many of them high-school students and industrial workers—these schools were alternate universities. Many courses concerned history, literature, and philosophy, and, at least at the Jefferson School, students could study art, drama, and music, as could their children. The tradition was revived, briefly, by the 1960s New Left that, in similar sites, sponsored free universities where the term *free* designated not an absence of tuition fees but an ideological and intellectual freedom from either the traditional Left parties or the conventional school system. I participated in organizing New York's Free University and two of its successors. While not affiliated with the labor movement or socialist parties, it successfully attracted more than a thousand mostly young students in each of its semesters and offered a broad range of courses taught by people of divergent intellectual and political orientations, including some free-market libertarians attracted to the school's nonsectarianism.¹¹

When I worked in a steel mill in the late 1950s, some of us formed a group that read current literature, labor history, and economics. I discussed books and magazine articles with some of my fellow workers in bars as well as on breaks. Tony Mazzocchi, who was at the same time a worker and union officer of a Long Island local of the Oil, Chemical and

Atomic Workers Union, organized a similar group, and I knew of several other cases in which young workers did the same. Some of these groups evolved into rank-and-file caucuses that eventually contested the leadership of their local unions; others were mainly for the self-edification of the participants and had no particular political goals.

But beyond formal programs, the working-class intellectual, although by no means visible in the United States, has been part of shop-floor culture since the industrializing era. In almost every workplace there is a person or persons to whom other workers turn for information about the law, the union contract, contemporary politics, or, equally important, as a source of general education. These individuals may or may not have been schooled, but, until the late 1950s, they rarely had any college education. For schools were not the primary source of their knowledge. They were, and are, largely self-educated. In my own case, having left Brooklyn College after less than a year, I worked in various industrial production jobs. When I worked the midnight shift, I got off at 8:00 a.m., ate breakfast, and spent four hours in the library before going home. Mostly I read American and European history and political economy, particularly the physiocrats, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, John Maynard Keynes, and Joseph Schumpeter. Marx's *Capital* I read in high school, and owned the three volumes.

My friend Russell Rommele, who worked in a nearby mill, was also an autodidact. His father was a first-generation German American brewery worker, with no particular literary interests. But Russell had read a wide range of historical and philosophical works as a high-school student at Saint Benedict's Prep, a Jesuit institution. The priests singled out Russell for the priesthood and mentored him in theology and social theory. The experience radicalized him, and he decided not to answer the call but to enter the industrial working class instead. Like me, he was active in the union and Newark Democratic Party politics. Working as an educator with a local union in the auto industry recently, I have met several active unionists who are intellectuals. The major difference between them and those of my generation is that they are college graduates, although none of them claim to have acquired their love of learning or their analytic perspective from schools. One is a former member of a radical organization; another learned his politics from participation in a shop-based study of a group/union caucus. In both instances, with the demise of their organizational affiliations, they remain habituated to reading, writing, and union activity.

Beneath the radar screen, union-university collaborations sprang up in the 1980s. I was among those who founded the Center for Worker Education at City College. It is a bachelor's degree program, begun for union members and their families, but expanded to other working people

as well. Worker education meant, in this case, that the emphasis is not on labor studies in the manner of Cornell, UCLA, University of Minnesota's schools of industrial and labor relations, or the Queens College Labor Resource Center. Instead, City College's center offers a liberal arts and professional curriculum as well as a few courses in labor history. While the educational content is often critical, the intention articulates with the recent focus on credentialism of undergraduate institutions. Similar programs have been in operation for two decades in a collaboration between the large New York municipal employees' District Council 37 and the College of New Rochelle, and the Hospital Workers Union's various arrangements with New York-area colleges that offer upgrading, training, and college courses to thousands of its members.

Parents, Neighborhood, Class, Culture

John Locke observes that, consistent with his rejection of innate ideas, even if conceptions of good and evil are present in divine or civil law, morality is constituted by reference to our parents, relatives, and especially the "club" of peers to which we belong:

He who imagines commendation and disgrace not to be strong motives to men to accommodate themselves to the opinions and rules of those with whom they converse seems little skilled in the nature or the history of mankind: the greatest part whereof we shall find govern themselves, chiefly, if not solely by this law of *fashion* [emphasis in the original]; and so they do what keeps them in reputation with their company, [with] little regard for the laws of God or the magistrate.¹²

William James puts the matter equally succinctly:

A man's social self is the recognition which he gets from his mates. We are not only gregarious animals, liking to be in the sight of our fellows, but we have an innate propensity to get ourselves noticed, and noticed favorably, by our kind. No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, that that should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof.¹³

That the social worlds of peers and family are the chief referents for the formation of the social self, neither philosopher doubted. Each in his own fashion situates the individual in social context, which provides a "common measure of virtue and vice" (Locke) even as they acknowledge the ultimate choice resides with the individual self. These, and not the

institutions, even those that have the force of law, are the primary sources of authority.

Hannah Arendt argues that education “by its very nature cannot forego either authority or tradition.” Nor can it base itself on the presumption that children share an autonomous existence from adults.¹⁴ Yet schooling ignores the reality of the society of kids at the cost of undermining its own authority. The society of kids is in virtually all classes an alternative and oppositional site of knowledge and of moral valuation. We have already seen how working-class kids get working-class jobs by means of their rebellion against school authority. Since refusal and resistance is a hallmark of that moral order, the few who will not obey the invocation to fail, or to perform indifferently in school, often find themselves marginalized or expelled from the society of kids. While they adopt a rationality that can be justified on eminently practical grounds, the long tradition of rejection of academic culture has proven hard to break, even in the wake of evidence that those working-class jobs to which they were oriented no longer exist. For what is at stake in the resistance of adolescents is their perception that the blandishments of the adult world are vastly inferior to the pleasures of their own. In the first place, the new service economy offers few inducements: wages are low, the job is boring, and the future bleak. And since the schools now openly present themselves as a link in the general system of control, it may appear to some students that cooperation is a form of self-deception.

If not invariably, then in many households parents provide to the young a wealth of knowledges: the family mythologies that feature an uncle or aunt, a grandparent or an absent parent. These are the stories, loosely based on some actual event(s) in which family members have distinguished themselves in various ways that (usually) illustrate a moral virtue or defect, the telling of which constitutes a kind of didactic message. Even when not attached to an overt narrative, parable, or myth, the actions of our parents offer many lessons: How do they deal with adversity? How do they address ordinary, everyday problems? What do they learn from their own trials and tribulations and what do they say to us? What are our parents’ attitudes toward money, joblessness, and everyday life disruptions such as sudden, acute illness or accidents? What do they learn from the endless conflicts with their parent(s) over issues of sex, money, and household responsibilities?

The relative weight of parental to peer authority is an empirical question that cannot be decided in advance; what both have in common is their location in everyday life. Parents are likely to be more susceptible to the authority of law and of its magistrates and, in a world of increasing uncertainty, will worry that if their children choose badly, they may be left

behind. But the associations with our peers we make in everyday life provide the recognition that we crave, define what is worthy of praise or blame, and confer approbation or disapproval on our decisions. But having made a choice that runs counter to that of “their company” or club, individuals must form or join a new “company” to confer the judgment of virtue on their actions. This company must, of necessity, consist of “peers,” the definition of which has proven fungible.

Religion, the law, and, among kids, school authorities face the obstacles erected by the powerful rewards and punishments meted out by the “clubs” to which people are affiliated. At a historical conjunction when—beneath the relentless pressure imposed by capital to transform all labor into wage labor, thereby forcing every adult into the paid labor force—the society of kids increasingly occupies the space of civil society. The neighborhood, once dominated by women and small shopkeepers, has all but disappeared save for the presence of children and youth. As parents toil for endless hours to pay the ever-mounting debts incurred by home ownership, perpetual car and appliance payments, and the costs of health care, kids are increasingly on their own, and this lack of supervision affects their conceptions of education and life.

Some recent studies and teacher observations have discovered a considerable reluctance among black students in elite universities to perform well in school, even among those with professional or managerial family backgrounds. Many seem indifferent to arguments that show that school performance is a central prerequisite to better jobs and higher status in the larger work world. Among the more acute speculations is the conclusion that black students’ resistance reflects an anti-intellectual bias and a hesitation, if not refusal, to enter the mainstream corporate world. There are similar attitudes among some relatively affluent white students as well. Although by no means a majority, some students are less enamored by the work world to which they, presumably, have been habituated by school, and especially by the prospect of perpetual work. In the third-tier universities, state and private alike, many students, apparently forced by their parents to enroll, wonder out loud why they are there. Skepticism about schooling still abounds even as they graduate high school and enroll in postsecondary schools in record numbers. According to one colleague of mine who teaches in a third-tier private university in the New York metropolitan area, many of these mostly suburban students “sleepwalk” through their classes, do not participate in class discussions, and are lucky to get a C grade.¹⁵

In the working-class neighborhoods—white, black, and Latino—the word is out: given the absence of viable alternatives, you must try to obtain that degree, but this defines the limit of loyalty to the enterprise.

Based on testimonies of high-school and community-college teachers, for every student who takes school knowledge seriously there are twenty or more who are timeservers. Most are ill prepared for academic work, and, since the community colleges, four-year state colleges, and “teaching” universities simply lack the resources to provide the means by which such students can improve their school performance, beyond the credential there is little motivation among them to try to get an education.

In some instances, those who break from their club and enter the regime of school knowledge risk being drummed out of a lifetime of relationships with their peers. What has euphemistically been described as “peer pressure” bears, among other moral structures, on the degree to which kids are permitted to cross over the line into the precincts of adult authority. While success in school is not equivalent to squealing on a friend to the cops, or transgressing some sacred moral code of the society of kids, it comes close to committing an act of betrayal. This is comprehensible only if the reader is willing to suspend the prejudice that schooling is tantamount to education and is an unqualified “good,” as compared to the presumed evil of school failure, or the decision of the slacker to rebel by refusing to succeed.

To invoke the concept of “class” in either educational debates or any other politically charged discourse generally refers to the white working class. Educational theory and practice treats blacks and Latinos, regardless of their economic positions, as unified categories. That black kids from professional, managerial, and business backgrounds share as much or more with their white counterparts than with working-class blacks is generally ignored by most educational writers, just as in race discourse whites are an undifferentiated racial identity, which refers in slightly different registers to people of African origin and those who migrated from Latin countries of South America and the Caribbean, and are treated as a unified category. The narrowing of the concept of class limits our ability to discern class at all. I want to suggest that, although we must stipulate ethnic, gender, race, and occupational distinction among differentiated strata of wage labor—with the exception of children of salaried professional and technical groups, where the culture of schooling plays a decisive role—class education transcends these distinctions. No doubt there are gradations among the strata that comprise this social formation, but the most privileged professional strata (physicians, attorneys, scientists, professors) and the high-level managers are self-reproducing, not principally through schooling but through social networks. These include private schools, some of which are residential; clubs and associations; and, in suburban public schools, the self-selection of students on the basis of distinctions. Show me a school friendship between the son or daughter of a corporate man-

ager and the child of a janitor or factory worker, and I will show you an anomaly.

Schooling selects a fairly small number of children of the class of wage labor for genuine class mobility. In the first half of the twentieth century, having lost its appeal among middle-class youth, the Catholic Church turned to working-class students as a source of cadre recruitment. In my neighborhood of the East Bronx two close childhood friends, both of Italian background, entered the priesthood. For these sons of construction workers, the Church provided their best chance to escape the hardships and economic uncertainties of manual labor. Another kid became a pharmacist because the local college, Fordham University, offered scholarships. A fourth was among the tiny coterie of students who passed the test for one of the city's special schools, Bronx Science, and became a science teacher. Otherwise, almost everybody else remained a worker or, like my best friend, Kenny, went to prison.

Despite the well-publicized claim that anyone can escape their condition of social and economic birth—a claim reproduced by schools and by the media with numbing regularity—most working-class students, many of whom have some college credits but often do not graduate—end up in low- and middle-level service jobs that do not pay a decent working-class wage. Owing to the steep decline of unionized industrial production jobs, those who enter factories increasingly draw wages substantially below union standards. Those who do graduate find work in computers, although rarely at the professional levels. The relatively low paid become K-12 school teachers and health care professionals, mostly nurses and technicians, or enter the social services field as caseworkers, medical social workers, or nonsupervisory social welfare workers. The question I want to pose is whether these “professional” occupations represent genuine mobility.

During the postwar economic boom that made possible a significant expansion of spending for schools, the social services, and administration of public goods, the public sector workplace became a favored site of black and Latino recruitment, mainly for clerical, maintenance, and entry-level patient care jobs in hospitals and other health care facilities. Within several decades a good number advanced to practical and registered nursing, but not in all sections of the country. As unionization spread to the nonprofit private sector as well as public employment in the 1960s and 1970s, these jobs paid enough to enable many to enjoy what became known as a middle-class living standard, with a measure of job security offered by union security and civil service status. While it is true that “job security” has often been observed in its breach, the traditional deal made by teachers, nurses, and social workers was that they traded higher incomes for job security. But after about 1960, spurred by the resurgent

civil rights movement, these “second-level” professionals—white and black—began to see themselves as workers more than professionals: they formed unions, struck for higher pay and shorter hours, and assumed a very unprofessional adversarial stance toward institutional authority. Contracts stipulated higher salaries, definite hours—a sharp departure from professional ideology—and seniority as a basis for layoffs, like any industrial contract, and demanded substantial vacation and sick leave.

Their assertion of working-class values and social position may have been strategic; indeed, it inspired the largest wave of union organizing since the 1930s. But, together with the entrance of huge numbers of women and blacks into the public and quasi-public sector workforces, it was also a symptom of the proletarianization of the second-tier professions. Several decades later, salaried physicians made a similar discovery; they formed unions and struck against high malpractice insurance costs as much as the onerous conditions imposed on their autonomy by health maintenance organizations and government authorities bent on cost containment, often at the physicians’ expense. More to the point, the steep rise of public employees’ salaries and benefits posed the question of how to maintain services in times of fiscal austerity, which might be due to economic downturn or to probusiness tax policies. The answer has been that the political and public officials told employees that the temporary respite from the classical trade union trade-off was over. All public employees have suffered a relative deterioration in their salaries and benefits. Since the mid-1970s fiscal crises, begun in New York City, they have experienced layoffs for the first time since the Depression. And their unions have been in a concessionary bargaining mode for decades. In the politically and ideologically repressive environment of the last twenty-five years, the class divide has sharpened. Ironically, in the wake of the attacks by legislatures and business against their hard-won gains in the early 1980s, the teachers unions abandoned their militant class posture and reverted to professionalism and a center-right political strategy.

In the early
1980s, the
teachers unions
abandoned their
militant class
posture and
reverted to
professionalism
and a center-right
political strategy.

In truth, schools are learning sites, even if only for a handful of intellectual knowledge. For the most part, they transmit the instrumental logic of credentialism, together with their transformation from institutions of discipline to those of control, especially in working-class districts. Even talented, dedicated teachers have difficulty reaching kids and convincing them that the life of the mind may hold unexpected rewards, though the career implications of critical thought are not apparent. The breakdown of the mission of public schools has produced varied forms of disaffection; if school violence has abated in some places, that does not signify the decline of gangs and other “clubs” that represent the autonomous world of youth. The society of

kids is more autonomous because, in contrast to 1960s, official authorities no longer offer hope; instead, in concert with the doctrine of control, they threaten punishment that includes, but is not necessarily associated with, incarceration. The large number of drug busts of young black and Latino men should not be minimized. With over a million blacks, more than 3 percent of the African American population—most of them young (25 percent of young black men)—within the purview of the criminal justice system, the law may be viewed as a more or less concerted effort to counter by force the power of peers. This may be regarded in the context of the failure of schools. Of course, more than three hundred years ago John Locke knew the limits of the magistrates—indeed, of any adult authority—to overcome the power of the society of kids.¹⁶

Conclusion

What are the requisite changes that would transform schools from credential mills and institutions of control to sites of education that prepare young people to see themselves as active participants in the world? As my analysis implies, the fundamental condition is to abolish high-stakes tests that dominate the curriculum and subordinate teachers to the role of drill-masters and subject students to stringent controls. By this proposal I do not mean to eliminate the need for evaluative tools. The essay is a fine measure of both writing ability and of the student's grasp of literature, social science, and history. While mathematics, science, and language proficiency do require considerable rote learning, the current curriculum and pedagogy in these fields includes neither a historical account of the changes in scientific and mathematical theory nor a metaconceptual explanation of what the disciplines are about. Nor are courses in language at the secondary level ever concerned with etymological issues, comparative cultural study of semantic differences, and other topics that might relieve the boredom of rote learning by providing depth of understanding. The broader understanding of science in the modern world—its relation to technology, war, and medicine, for example—should surely be integrated into the curriculum; some of these issues appear in the textbooks, but teachers rarely discuss them because they are busy preparing students for the high-stakes tests in which knowledge of the social contexts for science, language, and mathematics is not included.

I agree with Hannah Arendt that education “cannot forgo either authority or tradition.” But authority must be earned rather than assumed, and the transmission of tradition needs to be critical rather than worshipful. If teachers were allowed to acknowledge student skepticism to incor-

porate kids' knowledge into the curriculum by making what they know the object of rigorous study, especially popular music and television, teachers might be treated with greater respect. But there is no point denying the canon; one of the more egregious conditions of subordination is the failure of schools to expose students to the best exemplars, for people who have no cultural capital are thereby condemned to social and political marginality, let alone deprived of some of the genuine pleasures to be derived from encounters with genuine works of art. When the New York City Board of Education (now the Department of Education) mandates that during every semester high-school English classes read a Shakespeare play, and one or two works of nineteenth-century English literature, but afford little or no access to the best Russian novels of the nineteenth century, no opportunities to examine some of the most influential works of Western or Eastern philosophy, and provide no social and historical context for what is learned, tradition is observed in the breach more than in its practice.

Finally, schools should cut their ties to corporate interests and reconstruct the curriculum along the lines of genuine intellectual endeavor. Nor should schools be seen as career conduits, although this function will be difficult to displace: in an era of high economic anxiety, many kids and their parents worry about the future and seek some practical purchase on it. It will take some convincing that their best leg up is to be educated. It is unlikely in the present environment, but possible in some places.

One could elaborate these options; this is only an outline. In order to come close to their fulfillment at least three things are needed. First, we require a conversation concerning the nature and scope of education and the limits of schooling as an educational site. Along with this, theorists and researchers need to link their knowledge of popular culture, culture in the anthropological sense—that is, everyday life—with the politics of education. Teachers who, by their own education, are intellectuals who respect and want to help children obtain a genuine education regardless of their social class are in the forefront of enabling social change and are entrusted with widening students' possibilities in life. For this we need a new regime of teacher education founded on the idea that the educator must be educated well. It would surely entail abolishing the current curricula of most education schools, if not the schools themselves. Teacher training should be embedded in general education, not in “methods,” many of which are useless; instruction should include knowledge other than credential and bring the union/movement/organic intellectuals into classroom. In other words, the classroom should be a window on the world, not a hermetically sealed regime of the imposition of habitus, that is, making the test of academic success equivalent to measuring the degree to which the student

has been inculcated with the habit of subordination to school and pedagogic authority.¹⁷ And we need a movement of parents, students, teachers, and labor armed with a political program to force legislatures to adequately fund schooling at the federal, state, and local levels, and boards of education to deauthorize high-stakes tests that currently drive the curriculum and pedagogy.

To outline a program for the reconstruction of schooling does not imply that the chances for its success are good, especially in the current environment. Indeed, almost all current trends oppose the concept of public education as a school of freedom. But if the principle of critique is hope rather than the most rigorous form of nihilism—the suspension of action pending an upsurge from below—we have an obligation to resist but also to suggest alternatives. These will, inevitably, be attacked as utopian, and, of course, they are. But as many have argued, utopian thought is the condition for change. Without the “impossible,” there is little chance for reform.

Notes

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916; Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1964).

2. The literature on the limits of democracy in America is vast. For a searing indictment, see the classic critique: Grant McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1966).

3. Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural and social capital are introduced in Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Culture, and Society*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1977).

4. Andrew Ross, *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

5. Bourdieu, *Reproduction*.

6. Aaron V. Cicourel and John I. Kitsuse, *The Educational Decision-Makers* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs Merrill, 1963). This is one of the most persuasive studies demonstrating the salience of phenomenological investigations of social life. It is a tacit repudiation of the reliance of much of social science, especially sociology and political science, on what people say rather than what they do.

7. The best analysis of the relation of schools to the lives of working-class kids remains Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

8. Ross, *No-Collar*.

9. Paul C. Mishler, *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

10. Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor: An Autobiography* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1925).

11. Marvin Gettleman, “No Varsity Teams: New York’s Jefferson School of Social Science, 1943-1956,” *Science and Society* (fall 2002), 336–59. My reflections on the Free University and other New Left educational projects may be found in Aronowitz, “When the New Left Was New,” in *The Sixties without Apology*, ed. Sohnya Sayres, Anders Stephanson, Stanley Aronowitz, and Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

12. John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Dover, 1958), bk. 1, chap. 28, 478.

13. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1955), 1, 293.

14. Hannah Arendt, “Crisis in Education,” *Between Past and Future* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961).

15. James H. McWhorter, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

16. Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness*, 2d ed. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992); Henry A. Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy beyond the Culture of Fear* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); Stephanie Urso Spina, ed., *Smoke and Mirrors: The Hidden Context of Violence in Schools and Society* (Boulder, Colo.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

17. Bourdieu, *Reproduction*.