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# Labor of Learning

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## LABOR OF LEARNING

Parents are slow in realizing how unimportant the learning side of school is... – Alexander Neil.<sup>1</sup>

School – a building or institution in which children and teenagers are taught... – <http://dictionary.msn.com>.

This paper is an attempt to understand learning as labor – not metaphorically, not psychologically, but from the point of view of the political economy of education. Where does learning fit in the great scheme of things in the contemporary economy? How does this affect the theoretical view of schooling? In schools, students are asked to produce numerous things - literary essays, stories, poems, statistical reports, mathematical calculations, graphs, tables, musical performances, scientific research papers, posters, models, theater shows, oral presentations and written reports. I am interested in the things that students produce, and will try to understand them in economic terms of value and use-value.

My analysis suggests that learning – any school learning, even within a free school, democratic school, or a school of human development – remains essentially an exploitative economic enterprise. I question the idea of education as an essentially noble and liberating project, and focus on what should be done to limit the inevitable negative side of education. This leads me to question the assumption that schools must be institutions organized around learning. The project of a good school is impossible without rethinking the role of learning in schooling. Perhaps schools should be re-centered around some non-learning goals.

### Human capital theory and Marxist critique

A comprehensive review of literature related to the subject is not among the objectives of this paper. Such a task is not only impossible, but also unnecessary. What follows is only a brief outline of some existing theoretical context. In *Human Capital*, Gary Becker clearly demonstrates the increasing role of education in the economy as a whole as well as for the individual income of workers.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one can view the investment in education as the creation of a special form of capital, one with a rather high rate of return. Marxist critics point out that the human capital theory totally ignores the social aspects of capitalist production and schooling, and has no theory of reproduction.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Becker is not really interested in why working class kids get working class jobs, and whether this is a problem at all.<sup>4</sup> Bowles and Gintis accuse Becker of treating school as a black box, but curiously, their own account of schooling in turn treats learning – the central process – as a black box, too. Learning for them is disconnected from labor, and it is certainly not a form of labor. It is the periphery of school life (supplying credentials, getting used to supervisory authority, forming motivational patterns, segmentation of

workers) that produces the economic result capitalist employers desire. I use “periphery” without implying unimportance, but simply to point out that this is not learning itself. In other words, all the objectives of a capitalist school according to Bowles and Gintis can be equally achieved if schools would not be centered on learning. Their critique is aimed at processes that could be easily found outside of the world of schooling; the critique lacks educational specificity. Functions of schooling that worry Bowles and Gintis are not directly connected to learning.

In my opinion, the critique of human capital theory by Bowles and Gintis is quite convincing, but it does not tell the whole story. Learning itself is not innocent and benign, and it certainly cannot be understood as an investment. Learning is a form of labor, and the only thing that human capital theorists demonstrate is that some of it actually gets paid much later. But to suggest that the belated and partial payment is a return on capital investment is the same as to say that a factory worker invests into herself by working, and her paycheck is her profit.

Suppose I have a piggy bank, into which I put a penny per day for ten years. Of course, I should have \$36.52 when I break it. However, when I actually break it, it produces \$65. The mystery could have two solutions: first is that I somehow invested this money into a new form of capital, the human capital, and hence the return. The second solution is that some days I forgot that I put a penny in, and put in two or three, or that my family wanted to get rid of loose change, and dumped it into my piggy bank. Why human capital theorists subscribe to the first type of solution is beyond me. They assume there must be some magic within the piggy bank, rather than assuming something more mundane. Indeed, people who invest in education get more money than they put in, but maybe this is just because we overlook some of the contributions.

Human capital theory is not new, but it quietly continues to inform educational policies and educational rhetoric on various levels. My argument can be viewed as an extension of a Marxist critique of human capital theory, which attempts to show on a theoretical level from where the extra pennies might be coming. However, my conclusions can hardly be considered Marxist, and have to do with a vision of school reform within the existing economic relations.

## **The god of useless things**

The products of the students’ work lead a rather shadowy and invisible existence in educational theory and common educational discourse. A teacher friend of mine jokes that whenever it is time to throw away his students’ drawings, he feels guilty, as if the god of children was watching disapprovingly. Every teacher can probably share this sentiment. It is a sad moment in teaching when the cute and awkward things children produce end their short lives. Teachers usually try to burden parents with such a responsibility. “Take your work home, show it to your parents, hang it on the wall...”

Pieces of art are especially hard to let go, but so are student essays, stories and even worksheets. Perhaps because we feel guilty throwing children's work away, we also tend to ignore these things on a theoretical level.

Consider a paper airplane and a Boeing 777: there is something in common between these two things, besides the ability to fly. These are both results of human work; someone spent time, energy, creativity; someone spent a portion of one's life *creating* these things. These are both objects of transformed nature. Therefore, there is much in common between making the real airplane and making a paper airplane while learning about flight. Learning is largely a function of making things; it is a consequence of making something. The kinship of learning to making things, or to the world of utilitarian production is definitely not new and is a commonly assumed in Marxist discourse, but also in writing of such Progressives as Dewey and Montessori, and in Vygotsky and Leontyev traditions in Russian psychology. However, one may point at instances when students learn without leaving any material trace simply by listening and observing. This is an important special case to which I will return later. For now let us assume that learning at school more often than not involves the production of numerous tangible and intangible objects, some of which I listed in the first paragraph.

An elementary observation: from the point of view of a student, learning is an utterly unproductive activity. Learning is the production of useless things. The things that students *produce* while learning are never being consumed; no one needs them. In contrast to utilitarian production, learning can be defined as wasteful activity. Indeed, if the things children produce become useful directly to them or to someone else; if they are sold, exchanged, or simply used, then education loses its essence, and schools become factories. In a very physical sense, education occurs only when materials are turned into useless things. A potter must make a number of faulty pots in order to learn how to make good ones. As long as he is making faulty pots, he is a student; as soon as he starts turning out good ones, learning is over, and real production begins. A student must write essays no one wants to publish; as soon as she has paying readers, she stops being a student.

Since the dawn of time teachers have realized how hard it is to motivate all children to learn. One can motivate all children to learn some of the time, or one can motivate some children to learn all the time, but one cannot motivate all children to learn all the time. This is connected to the fact that the products of student work have *no utility*. The lack of motivation is a direct consequence of the fact that the things produced by students are useless.

In a way of a brief illustration, imagine yourself working at a mathematical research lab. Your supervisor asked you to perform a set of complex calculations. It was difficult, tedious, and only sometimes interesting work, which took you a week to finish. Today is a good day, because you are done. You bring the results to the supervisor's office; he looks at your papers and says "What a marvelous job!" You talk for a few minutes, and

then he promptly crumples your papers and throws them away into a wastebasket. Such a scenario is very hard to swallow, no matter how well you are paid for the job. Your morale and motivation will inevitably suffer; never mind any rhetoric that you were doing it for your own good. Yet this is what all students have to do every day for many years. The absurdness of this experience is not apparent only because we are used to it.

The fact that all of the things produced by students have no obvious utility creates a strange economy of the wastebasket, which in turn affects the students' motivation, the character of social relations in schools, and the nature of schools as organizations. The whole range of the wastebasket economy's consequences may be examined in a book-length study one day, but within the framework of this paper it is enough to set this as a background. The most important for me is to reverse the assumption that making useless things is a byproduct of learning. To the contrary, learning is a byproduct of making useless things.

## **The value of useless things**

To all products of student work Karl Marx' account may apply: "Nothing can have value, without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it: the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value."<sup>5</sup> The things produced by students obviously do not exist as commodities. They are neither sold, nor exchanged; they are neither gifts, nor they are produced for personal consumption. Therefore students perceive their work as zero-value production. Such is the appearance available to students, but as Marx himself has convincingly demonstrated, appearances can be very deceiving in economic relations. Moreover, the *appearance* of learning as non-labor has very serious economic implications. If not deliberately calculated, such appearance is certainly useful to those benefiting from the capitalist mode of production. I will show below that learning *is* a form of productive labor, although it creates value of a very special form.

According to Marx, the value of a commodity is nothing but a mere congelation of homogeneous human labor.<sup>6</sup> Marx viewed labor power as a unique form of commodity that is "*a source not only of value, but of more value than it has itself.*"<sup>7</sup> The value of labor power is in turn determined by the labor that went into the creation and recreation of labor power. In other words, the value of labor power is the labor of all other workers that went into the production of food, clothing, and shelter for the worker. Note that accumulating or "storing" value in either material objects or human beings is not the same thing as capital investment, as human capital theorists may sometimes lead us to believe. Marx considered education to be one of these components of labor that goes into the creation of labor power:

In order to modify the human organism, so that it may acquire skills and handiness in a given branch of industry, and become labour power of a special

kind, a special education or training is requisite, and this, on its part, costs an equivalent in commodities of a greater or less amount. [...] The expenses of this education (excessively small in the case of ordinary labour power) enter *pro tanto*<sup>8</sup> into the total value spent in its production.<sup>9</sup>

Two points are to be made here. First, things have changed dramatically since Marx was writing *das Kapital*. The portion of labor power value associated with training and education has grown tremendously, as postindustrial society becomes a reality. According to the US Census Bureau, a college graduate earns, roughly, 1.7 times more than a high school graduate per lifetime, and a person with a Ph.D. earns 2.6 times more money.<sup>10</sup> The very fact that the US economy is functioning and thriving shows that even though the value of labor power really increases dramatically with the input of more education into it, workers still are able to create much more value than their labor power contains. In other words, it makes good economic sense for capitalists to hire educated workers, despite the cost differential. Again, I would like to refer to the human capital theorists who extensively demonstrated this point, and effectively repudiated Marx's and other classical economists' simplistic assumption about the homogeneity of labor.

Second, Marx was no educational theorist; he simply did not know much about learning. Had he more opportunity or desire to look closely into the processes that make up education, he could have noticed that the labor that goes into education is only partially the labor of a teacher and other school staff. *Students themselves* do the lion's share of work, which is also largely overlooked by the human capital theory. At any given time about thirty students work in a classroom per one teacher. We may argue that teacher's work is more intensive or more complex, or that for each classroom teacher there is at least one administrator or school support staff working, but still one has to agree that most of the work put into learning is done by students.

Dewey made clear the connection between the students' own activity and learning. A child cannot learn unless she *does* something, unless she expends her muscle, brain, and imagination. The work a student puts into writing a paper, solving a problem, or making a paper airplane, is a necessary and major component of the educational process. Dewey made such an argument in the context of supporting his ideas of new Progressive education; he did not see the same connection between students' work and learning applied to the old, traditional academic learning. Indeed, from a psychological point of view, there is a huge difference between traditional academic learning and the active learning Dewey had in mind. However, from an economic standpoint this difference does not exist; all learning involves student activity of some sort. Even passive listening to a teacher's lecture is work, a purposeful expenditure of individual's strength. Importantly, learning is students' work – but is it labor?

When we pay a doctor's bill, we cover not only value of services rendered, but also the value of a, say, one-paragraph story about a princess in the far-away land that the doctor wrote when she was a second grader. In order to be able to make diagnosis and write a

prescription, it is necessary for her to write the princess story (just as necessary as her internship training). As a customer, you and I purchase a fraction of that story when we receive medical services, even though we have never read it, and do not know about its existence. In a similar way, when purchasing a ceramic pot we also pay for the production of all broken ones with which the potter was practicing. Student labor is unique in that it deposits value not in its immediate product (the princess story or a broken pot), but in the doctor, the worker herself, or, more precisely, in her labor power. The Princess story has no utility; it is a non-commodity, which *does not mean* that the little girl's labor is a non-labor. She creates real value by writing the story, but this value is transferred only much later from her onto an entirely different product, the medical services. The value created by students is like the Sleeping Beauty that appears to be dead only to resurrect again under different circumstances in another form.

The things produced by students are, in essence, means of production, like machines or materials in an industrial process. Here is how Marx describes the process of value transfer from the means of production to a new product:

While productive labour is changing the means of production into constituent elements of a new product, their value undergoes a metempsychosis. It deserts the consumed body, to occupy the newly created one. ... The property therefore which labour-power in action, living labour, possesses of preserving value, at the same time that it adds it, is a gift of Nature which costs the labourer nothing, but which is very advantageous to the capitalist inasmuch as it preserves the existing value of his capital.<sup>11</sup>

The specifics of learning as labor are that its material products are really short-lived. As soon as they are ready, they are already consumed, and the value created in them deserts them so quickly that no one even notices they had value. Producing the princess story *is* consuming it; by the time the story is ready, it is consumed, and what remains is a valueless corpse of a thing. Yet the value created does not just disappear in smoke; it is now a part of the future doctor's labor power, and is only awaiting the right circumstances to show up in medical services she provides. The doctor then not only creates new value but also preserves (transfers) the value created by her as a student – largely as a free gift to her employer.

## **Two sides of activity: a definition of education**

It is easy to notice that *any* labor, indeed any activity, has two sides to it: one side is increasing the value of the object of labor; another side is increasing the value of the labor power of the worker. In other words, any labor is a production of something external to the worker, and at the same time it is a process of changing the worker herself. Even an experienced potter learns something every time he makes a pot; this is why work experience is valued so much on the labor market. Marx never had a chance to develop

the anthropology of labor, but he was certainly aware of the fact that a laborer, besides changing the material world around her, also changes herself: “By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway.”<sup>12</sup> On the margins of *The German Ideology*, Marx wrote about two sides to every activity: transformation (Bearbeitung) of nature by people and transformation of people by people.<sup>13</sup>

Let us notice that Marx is referring to that second side of activity as “transformation of people by people.” What he means is that the change that occurs in the laborer as a result of the labor process is significantly social in its nature. What we “learn” by doing something is a specifically human, or social way of doing it. The very notions of skill and knowledge refer to the social knowledge of better ways of doing things. I will need to abstract from this fact, however, so that the main point remains more visible: anything we do has two sides to it – the productive side, which refers to the immediate goal of the person’s activity; and “learning” side, that is a sum of all gainful changes that occur in the person who is the subject of such activity. The mere fact that a person is learning something does not make his or her activity a learning activity, and it does not make the social institution in which it takes place educational.

A distinction between learning activity and learning as an effect of any activity may help clarify the duality of human activity. Learning as an effect is present whenever we do something, whether we are active for pleasure, for utilitarian purposes, or specifically for learning. However, only when we do something primarily for learning, we engage into the learning activity. For instance reading a book for fun may result in some learning, but it is not a learning activity. Reading a book for school is a learning activity.

*The only* difference between learning activity and productive labor is that in the learning activity, the first, productive side of labor is missing or greatly overshadowed by the second, “learning” side. In the “real,” adult labor, the productive side of labor clearly dominates. Learning activity is simply the sort of labor with the hypertrophied side that Marx called “transformation of people by people.” This difference defines learning activity and demarcates the boundaries of the whole of the educational world, not only of learning in schools. Of course, there exist a great variety of human activities with different ratios of the two sides; some are closer to learning activity, some to the productive labor. Some, like on-the-job training, are in between, which means that workers produce real commodities to be sold, but not as efficiently, and with lesser quality. Yet things being thrown away usually clearly indicate an educational institution. One can tell a school from a factory by their dumpsters. A school can be defined as a building where delivery trucks unload, but never load. Instead, every morning school busses bring as many children as they take away in the afternoon. Totally invisibly for drivers and for the passengers, the afternoon buses carry more valuable cargo than the



morning busses do because of the value accumulated during the day in the minds and bodies of future laborers.

Let me return to the special case of learning that occurs seemingly without producing any object, tangible or intangible, by simple listening and observing. Academic learning activity in a sense of “gaining knowledge” is a case of knowledge production. A distinction between knowledge production and knowledge consumption maybe helpful in understanding the economic significance of learning. One can produce knowledge without consuming it, and one can consume knowledge without producing it. Of course, one can also produce and consume knowledge at the same time. To produce knowledge is to record certain meaningful information on any mechanical, electronic, or biological media, including human memory. To consume knowledge is to use it for any number of practical and not so practical purposes, from impressing a cocktail party acquaintance to developing a new technology. This simple construct becomes confusing only in the case of curiosity, when people use knowledge to obtain pleasure.

Generally, people want to produce knowledge for at least four distinctive purposes, which separate four types of knowledge consumption. The first one is for immediate personal consumption. We open the phone book to produce some knowledge that is immediately useful for some practical task at hand. The second is knowledge gained for pure pleasure and without any practical goal in mind. In this case, knowledge production and knowledge consumption are very closely intertwined, but the type of consumption (pleasure) is different form type one. Such pleasurable consumption of knowledge is not without practical consequences (we never know what will become useful in the future – this applies equally to theoretical physics and to watching Jeopardy), but its primary motivation is pleasure; Eros of the mind drives it. The third is to produce knowledge for others, knowledge to be sold or exchanged just like any other commodity. Most of the research and much of the information technology related work falls into this category. And finally, the fourth type of knowledge production is one specifically designed as learning activity. As such, it is no different from producing faulty clay pots. What students produce is not new knowledge, and it is as useless as broken pots or paper airplanes; it is obviously not the knowledge production of type three, since no one else consumes it. However, it is also rarely the types one and two.

The big hope of Progressive education was to change academic learning activity in a way that its components will fall into either type one, two, or three of knowledge production. Variations of the same hope still inspire many curriculum theorists. Admittedly, some serious progress has been made in this direction, and I would be the last to underestimate the importance of hands-on, project-oriented, student-centered, or constructivist learning. Yet theoretically it is very unlikely that such attempts will be ultimately successful. We cannot make all the knowledge production needed for contemporary education pleasurable or personally useful, or socially needed. The hope that all kids will learn quadratic equations and the names of amino acids out of sheer curiosity is simply

unrealistic. In today's complex society one has to produce enormous amounts of useless knowledge in order to be able to produce some useful knowledge. The real benefit of academic learning is not the knowledge that students produce; rather, it is the enhanced ability to produce knowledge of types one, two, and three.

The Progressives have trouble realizing that to achieve their goal of totally motivated learning they have to eliminate education itself. A school where kids learn out of curiosity only is really an entertainment establishment. A school where they make real discoveries and produce valuable information is a research firm. A school where kids learn only what they really need right know is a street corner. A school that is really a school is where students produce useless knowledge in order to learn to produce useful knowledge.

For the purposes of my argument, learning activity can be defined as an activity, an immediate product of which is not as important as changes that occur in the person–subject of the activity. Education, in turn, is a social sphere where learning activity plays a central role.<sup>14</sup> Education is a sum of social institutions and practices that are specifically designed and focused on the practices of learning activity as defined above.

## **Who benefits?**

Let us get back to the value created by learning activity. The total labor that goes into the value of each commodity we see on the market consists of two parts: the immediately productive labor and the labor of learning. The economic shadow of the little princess story, as intangible as it is, remains in the doctor's mind and body, and quietly trickles down to the prescription slip. As I have pointed out earlier, the portion of learning labor tends to increase as society moves towards a more education-driven economy. A contemporary American worker spends at least 13 years in classroom, which means that for every three years of employment we spend one year in the classroom. Every hour of productive work now requires almost 20 minutes of learning. Every 8-hour workday is in reality a 10-hour day, if we add years of education to it.

Critics of schooling long observed that most of the learning that takes place in schools is irrelevant to work experience; yet it makes no difference that much of the learning is irrelevant or has little to do with future productive labor. In part, this is only a *perceived* irrelevancy, resulting from the difficulty with which we can link the Princess story with the medical services directly. Let us assume that part of learning is a complete waste of time, or is even detrimental to the value of labor power. Just like it is with any labor, the socially necessary waste and labor associated with that waste should be taken into consideration when determining the value of the final product. In other words even a skilled potter breaks a pot or two now and then – we pay for the wasted materials and wasted labor anyway. The opinion that modern education is especially wasteful or

harmful may or may not be true, but it has very little to do with economic aspect of learning.

Suppose that in spinning cotton, the waste for every 115 lbs. used amounts to 15 lbs., which is converted, not into yarn, but into "devil's dust." Now, although this 15 lbs. of cotton never becomes a constituent element of the yarn, yet assuming this amount of waste to be normal and inevitable under average conditions of spinning, its value is just as surely transferred to the value of the yarn, as is the value of the 100 lbs. that form the substance of the yarn. The use-value of 15 lbs. of cotton must vanish into dust, before 100 lbs. of yarn can be made.<sup>15</sup>

As long as more "efficient" forms of education are not a reality, the waste in education is a normal part of the economic process. I am using the term "efficient" only to indicate an idealized form of learning where all student activities would significantly contribute to increasing students' skills and knowledge. As it will become apparent, I believe such education is neither possible nor desirable. The efficiency models a la Taylorism in education, which all but killed the Progressive education experiments, stem from the assumption that such efficiency is possible.

As the labor of learning is hidden and removed from the actual production of commodities, contemporary capitalism uses it as an additional form of surplus value extraction. Students work for free for many years, and as a result their labor power accumulates enormous value. However, when time comes for workers to sell their labor power on the market, what they sell is their actual labor power, that is capacity for work, *not their past labor power as students*. The labor of learning and value created by it are not counted when labor power is sold. There are lots and lots of extra pennies when it is time to break the piggy bank of contemporary labor power.

One may object by suggesting that the value accumulated from learning results in higher wages of a more qualified worker. In other words, one can argue that learning is well paid as labor. According to the US Census Bureau, having completed a bachelor's degree increases one's lifetime income by \$600,000. Following this logic, a college student makes \$150,000 (in future earnings) per year just by being a student. Even considering the skyrocketing cost of higher education, this is not a bad investment. I am not denying that more educated labor power has more value and therefore costs more to employers. Yet the student's own labor during the years of primary and secondary education is not taken into consideration when labor power is purchased. In other words, educated labor power has much more value than uneducated labor power, the difference is larger than the income figures may suggest. Economically speaking, an employer purchases the actual ability to work, not the past labor.

Let us assume for a moment that the "Learn now – get paid later" theory that the US federal government assumes to be true is valid. Even then education may not benefit students that much, if at all. A high school graduate makes \$821,000 during her lifetime

(the Census bureau assumes average 40 years of work between ages of 25 and 65). The 13 years of schooling can be then assumed directly factored in. We should really spread the amount over 53 years of work life. Just by doing that we can see that the real average yearly income of a high school graduate is \$15,490. Even the Statistical Brief tells us that the income of high school graduates actually *dropped* during the twenty years from 1974 to 1994 if adjusted for inflation. One needs a college education now to maintain the same standard of living that one's parents could afford with a high school diploma. In 1973, only 30% of high school graduates enrolled in college, but by 1993, 41% did.<sup>16</sup> In other words, people need to *work longer hours* to earn the same amount of money, if only we assume that learning is real, value-producing work. Americans have some of longest workweeks,<sup>17</sup> but on top of that, consider two facts. First, women who massively entered workforce in previous decades dramatically increased the total workweek of an American family.<sup>18</sup> A two-income family works twice as much as a one-income family of the 50-s. Second, by shifting towards universal 13-year education, Americans now put significantly more hidden school hours into their total working time. It would take massive statistical research to illustrate these trends, and I must limit myself to pointing them out. The unprecedented economic growth is not only a result of new technologies; it is also a result of the unprecedented exploitation of an unusually educated labor force.

I must acknowledge that these statistical manipulations make sense if, and only if, one spreads the lifetime income over the years of learning. In reality, however, students are not paid at all during their years of learning. The essential elements of selling and purchasing of labor power are obviously missing here. The specific form of labor – labor of learning – never figures on the balance sheets of employers, it is never compensated, and is never thought of as labor. For all practical purposes, learning is work gratis. Students spend 13 years of their lives just to get to ground zero, where they become barely employable. Employers, in turn, accept much of these 13 years of value-creating labor as a free gift from the public and the workers. Most of this labor is unpaid, but moreover, it is compulsory.

## **Unpaid AND compulsory**

If we assume learning to be labor, then the compulsory character of education comes to new grim light. It is one thing to justify compulsory learning, if it something a student does for his own good, but it is much more difficult to justify compulsory labor. Here is how the US Department of Labor describes the history of the child labor laws to kids:

From the mid 1800's to the early part of this century, many young children were employed in what we now call "sweatshop conditions." These children spent many hours working hard at dangerous jobs instead of going to school and getting a good education. Many factories and other firms hired kids because they could be paid less than adults. Many children were overworked and underpaid, often working 16 hours a day, six days a week, and earning only pennies an hour. Kids

often were injured or killed while working under these brutal conditions. The child labor laws came into being to stop these abuses and help young people obtain schooling. These laws were passed to protect the health, safety, and well being of young workers while at the same time affording them an opportunity to obtain an education.<sup>19</sup>

The introduction of universal compulsory education is linked to the abolition of child labor. In 1827 Massachusetts adopted the nation's first compulsory education law, mandating tax-supported schools in every Massachusetts community with 500 families or more.<sup>20</sup> In 1836 Massachusetts Legislature adopted a law prohibiting the employment of any child under 15 years of age who had received less than three months of schooling in the previous year.<sup>21</sup> As years passed, child labor became more and more obsolete, but schooling became more and more compulsory, sometimes absurdly so. Detroit parents today, for instance, could spend 90 days in jail if their children skip schools.<sup>22</sup> It looks bad enough if you think of schools as forced baby-sitting; this looks even worse if they are in fact forced sweatshops. Let me mention again, that if I ignore the social aspect of schooling (the imposing of work ethics, reproduction of class structure, etc.) that Marxist theorists described, it is not because I think of it as unimportant, but simply because from the point of view of social justice the “core” of schooling – learning activity – is as worrisome as the social aspect of schooling.

The abolition of child labor in industrialized nations was in fact a shift to a different, more efficient, and unpaid form of child labor that is called school learning. Let us notice that the 19-century child labor was still paid at a higher rate than the labor of learning in the 21 century. As terrible as working conditions were, the child factory laborer of the 19-s century could still support himself; a contemporary child is completely dependent on his parents or on public support. In other words, more people are forced to work for more years and lesser pay as students.

The huge accumulated invisible value from the child labor of learning becomes a major source of corporate profit. The unprecedented gains in work productivity are only possible with the more educated labor force. To do well in today’s economy, a capitalist needs to convince workers to spend many long years in school preparing themselves for the workplace of the future. A theory like human capital, or a version of it the US Census Bureau subscribes to is quite suitable tools for it. Unfortunately, large portion of educational theory implicitly supports such a theory by searching for better forms of learning without thinking about who really benefits from it.

## **Education as Emancipation**

One can certainly object to the gloomy picture I paint by suggesting that the purpose of learning is much larger than creating labor power; that we learn for ourselves, not for our future employer. The cultural archetype of education goes hand-to-hand with ideals of personal emancipation, liberty, and democracy. Many educators think of education as the

essential noble endeavor, which, despite all of its shortcomings, contains a promise of human freedom and happiness. As an educator, I have a vested interest in such an understanding. Even the most far-reaching critics of education such as Paulo Freire and critical theorists almost without exception target the real-life oppressive education, but instead offer another version of good, democratic, or free education.<sup>23</sup> Not many question education, *any education*, as a project. It does not take an extensive historical study to trace such beliefs in education to the Enlightenment and then to German Idealism. Kant went so far as to suggest that a person becomes fully human only through education; education for Kant is a major precondition of emancipation.<sup>24</sup> He meant, of course, a liberal arts education; not so much *Buildung* as *Erziehung*.

Similarly, Dewey professed almost religious faith in education. Robert Westbrook, for instance, believes that for Dewey, the school replaced the church in the 1890-s as the key institution in the saving of souls for democracy.<sup>25</sup> Characteristically, President Clinton used the language of faith and revolution in his last State of the Union Address:

First and foremost, we need a 21st century revolution in education, guided by our faith that every child can learn. Because education is more than ever the key to our children's future, we must make sure all our children have that key.<sup>26</sup>

Yet a sober look into what schools actually teach will inevitably reveal that *Erziehung*, or social and character education in connection with liberal arts curriculum, has all but disappeared from educational horizon. Here is a list of *President's & Secretary's Priorities*, as supplied by the US Department of Education:

1. All students will read independently and well by the end of 3rd grade.
2. All students will master challenging mathematics, including the foundations of algebra and geometry, by the end of 8th grade.
3. By 18 years of age, all students will be prepared for and able to afford college.
4. All states and schools will have challenging and clear standards of achievement and accountability for all children, and effective strategies for reaching those standards.
5. There will be a talented, dedicated and well-prepared teacher in every classroom.
6. Every classroom will be connected to the Internet by the year 2000 and all students will be technologically literate.
7. Every school will be strong, safe, drug-free and disciplined.<sup>27</sup>

There is not a trace of *Erziehung*, nothing about liberation, or emancipation; it is all about training workers. Kant surely had something entirely different in mind. We may believe that Johnny and Jenny will use their reading skills attained by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade to read great American novels for their pleasure and spiritual growth, but as adults they are more likely to read instruction manuals, technical literature, or finance reports. Their prospects

of reading presidential election pamphlets are also limited, so the argument that democracy somehow requires thirteen years of learning does not strike as true. Johnny and Jenny will connect to the Internet so they become the uniquely resourceful and enormously productive working machines called “the American middle-class.” I invite the reader to guess how much knowledge content and how many skills learned at school she or he uses for private and public life outside of work; for the sort of things associated with emancipation, personal freedom, and self-realization. What we now call education does make our financial prospects brighter, but hardly liberates us.

I will set aside a discussion whether the Enlightenment project of education as emancipation had any chance to succeed. For now, let us establish that it has not succeeded yet. The next question is whether it can truly work in the future. A multitude of critical theorists have long argued that education has the function of control, disciplining, and oppression. In my opinion, it is also a form of labor, and as such it constitutes economically exploitative relations. At least, we must recognize the exploitative economic nature of learning as labor. Learning needs to be understood not as a personal liberation, but as a form of forced labor.

## **Deeducationalization of schooling**

“And what exactly do we do then?” – the reader will certainly ask. Theorists like Paul Goldman and Ivan Illich suggested that we get rid of organized schooling altogether.<sup>28</sup> The contemporary proponents of home schooling make similar suggestions.<sup>29</sup> Their critique of schooling is very convincing, but conclusions are less than satisfactory. If organized education is indeed an essentially flawed project, what else is there to do? Here is where I depart from Marxism as a theoretical guide.

Capitalism is certainly an exploitative economic system, but I would be the last to suggest abandoning it in favor of a socialist economy of any kind (my personal bias of a person who grew up in the Soviet Union). I just find it extremely hard to believe that humane or even mildly democratic socialism is possible. Granted, capitalism inevitably produces social inequality, poverty, and unemployment, but it is the best working economic principle we have. Like a powerful but hazardous and dangerous technology, the capitalist economic system should be tolerated, but amended, regulated, contained to be more suitable for human society. Unregulated capitalism creates tremendous inequality and human suffering; capitalism that is regulated and limited by political democracy can work for the interest of the public.

Being an integral part of the capitalist economic machine, schooling must continue despite its exploitative nature. Education should be classified as one of the society’s unavoidable ills. We should tolerate education, restrain it, regulate it, and try to make it more humane, but never admire or idealize it. Of course, no one idealizes the *existing*

schooling, but I would argue that one must not fall into piety about any *ideal* model of schooling as well. We must abandon the great metanarrative of education in favor of a much more critical understanding of its limits and its enormous human cost. In general, it is much better to see and tolerate evil than to believe it to be good.

There are two implications of the learning as labor theory: the economical and the pedagogical. The economical implication has to do with recognition of who benefits from education and who pays for it. Corporations of the industrialized world must contribute to public education to a much greater extent than they do now, but without exercising undue influence on the content and the process of schooling. Currently the indicators of industrial productivity are largely skewed because the unpaid labor of learning is made possible only by massive public subsidies and economic support of one group of workers (parents) to another group of workers (students). The contemporary capitalism has learned to make a profit from parental love. Unfortunately, the universities are happy to perpetuate the myth of education as emancipation, and to cash in on the ever-increasing number of students forced to go to college for purely economic reasons.

The pedagogical implication is to reduce the level of coercion in education. Modern education as a social sphere appears as a particular form of division of labor. One can imagine a master potter, tired of all the apprentices taking too much time from the regular potters, deciding to build another shop just for the apprentices to learn some basics of pottery-making first. Of course, historically the young scribes and the future clerics were probably the first ones to be moved from the regular workplace to separate facilities, but this does not change the nature of their activity, which is to produce many useless writings before they can be allowed to write for real. The broken pots just provide better imagery for the sort of things an educational institution produces. The world of education as a separate social sphere thus was created. Like with any other form of division of labor, it made great economic sense, but produced its own problems. One of the main problems was that an educational institution, where learning activity clearly dominates every other form of social activity, turned out to be a place that has to rely on extra-economical means of coercion to motivate its workers. One can argue that in a certain sense schools are feudal remnants within the capitalist economies. That can also be called socialist institutions, because real-life socialism has to rely heavily on extra-economical stimuli (read violence) as well. The level of coercion in public schooling is unacceptable and contradicts the doctrine of universal human rights.<sup>30</sup> In addition, forced labor is very inefficient, which became abundantly clear since the introduction of truly mass schooling.

To reduce the level of extra-economic coercion we need to move schools closer to the regular economic form of motivation that capitalism developed. Simply paying students money for their labor is probably out of the question, at least for the foreseeable future. Yet students need some compensation for learning. They need *something else* besides



learning from school. Here is how a coach who is also a teacher could have described this: “They need something from me – to be able to play the sport they love. But I also need something from them, which is to show me respect in the classroom and to do their schoolwork. The unspoken agreement “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” is as old as human kind. That is why coaches often have better relations with kids, and make better teachers.” This is an example of the economy of mutual interest that does not require massive coercion, but is also free of utopian assumptions about self-motivated learning. The coaches do not hold a monopoly on motivational power (and not many coaches can play this game sensibly). In fact all good teachers give something to kids in return for sometimes boring schoolwork. Some do it through other extracurricular activities; some simply find a way to give the students respect, recognition, and companionship they need. This is an economic mechanism oiled by interpersonal relation, but powered by mutual interest.

One common assumption that I want to question is that the learning has to be at the center of an institution like school. The division of labor in the instance of education has gone too far. Schools have become institutions too specialized to remain viable. Schools are for learning – what could be more obvious. However, this may not be such a self-evident truth. The goals of mass education are not noble, and include exploitation of students by their future employers. However, we can simply stop thinking of schools as exclusively educational institutions, and instead make them centered on a much more complex idea of a democratic good life. The capitalist economy is not the whole social life; learning activity is not the whole school life. For adults, it is perfectly acceptable to go to highly specialized economic institutions in the morning, and then enjoy their civic and personal lives later. For kids, who are not paid for their work, such separation is utterly unfeasible. Schools’ strong orientation to learning has to be diluted by a multitude of other things to do, and by relations outside of learning.

Learning is impossible to sustain as an all-encompassing activity around which everything is centered. Yet what I find the most worrisome is the steady decline of extracurricular activities and other “peripherals” of school life like rituals and celebrations; the extermination of places and periods of times. Most kids get up in the morning and go to school so they can be around their friends and sometimes around a few cool adults. The community and fellowship are by far the strongest attractor and the hardest currency schools can offer in exchange for their incessant demands. The schools become obsessed with the increasing of “on-task” time and getting rid of everything non-educational.

One quote may help to explain the economy of a good school. A student from school number 825 in Moscow, where I conducted a few interviews several years ago, was asked: "What subjects do you dislike?" "Chemistry"- she answered rather quickly. "But you still do your chemistry homework, don't you? Why?" - "Well, you see my chemistry

teacher is such a great person; if I don't do my homework, she gets upset."<sup>31</sup> This demonstrates the hierarchy of relations that exists in a good school. Parts of learning are inevitably boring, they are nothing like personal liberation, or search for knowledge for the sake of knowledge. But the girl I spoke to exchanged this labor of learning for some other very tangible benefits that she received from school. She gets paid for her learning by the quality of communal life she receives at school. We do the unpleasant things for our family and our friends, without the expectation of a monetary repayment. We do it because we believe that this is the price we must pay for the continuation of our relations. This is precisely what happens in a good school. Students do unpleasant, and as I have argued, not so beneficial for them things, because they like their teachers and their school. Teachers need to do the very best to be liked instead of repeating the empty incantations of "higher expectations."

I imagine a school that is more like a neighborhood youth association McLaughlin, Irby and Langman describe in *Urban Sanctuaries*.<sup>32</sup> It provides a multitude of benefits for young people – a place to hang out, to make friends, to create and to think, but also, among other things, a place to learn. Learning is something one has to do in order to be able to attend – it is work, a form of compensation students have to provide to the organization. Yet both adults and young leaders of such a school realize that they need some other powerful reasons for students to be there. Such a school will be less educational in the sense I outlined above, but a good place to be. Of course, some things need to be changed to create such schools. They need to be small, personal, allow for student choice and teachers' experimenting with a multitude of non-educational activities. These may very well be more expensive schools, but those who benefit must pay at least something.

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- <sup>1</sup> Alexander S. Neil, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (New York: Hart Publishing, 1961), 25
- <sup>2</sup> Becker, G.S., *Human capital*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, c1993.
- <sup>3</sup> Samuel Bowles, and Herbert Gintis, The Problem with Human Capital Theory--A Marxian Critique, *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 65, No. 2, (May, 1975), pp. 74-82.
- <sup>4</sup> This, of course, is a reference to Paul Willis' book *Learning to labor: how working class kids get working class jobs* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1981, c1977). The title of this paper is another reference to the same book. A fascinating cultural account of the reproduction theory, the book assumes that learning and labor are two different things – an assumption I question.
- <sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1957, 16.
- <sup>6</sup> Marx, 15.
- <sup>7</sup> Marx, 93.
- <sup>8</sup> To that extent.
- <sup>9</sup> Marx, 81.
- <sup>10</sup> *More Education Means Higher Career Earnings*, US Census Bureau Statistical Brief, [http://www.census.gov/apsd/www/statbrief/sb94\\_17.pdf](http://www.census.gov/apsd/www/statbrief/sb94_17.pdf), 1994.
- <sup>11</sup> Marx, 100.
- <sup>12</sup> Marx, 85.
- <sup>13</sup> Bisher haben wir hauptsächlich nur die eine Seite der menschlichen Tätigkeit, die *Bearbeitung der Natur* durch die Menschen betrachtet. Die andere Seite, die *Bearbeitung der Menschen durch die Menschen...* Karl Marx, *Die deutsche Ideologie*, [http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me03/me03\\_anm.htm#M1](http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me03/me03_anm.htm#M1)
- <sup>14</sup> I use the word “sphere” as Michael Walzer uses it in *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- <sup>15</sup> Marx, 99.
- <sup>16</sup> [http://www.census.gov/apsd/www/statbrief/sb94\\_25.pdf](http://www.census.gov/apsd/www/statbrief/sb94_25.pdf).
- <sup>17</sup> In 1997, about 30 percent of men and 15 percent of women usually worked more than 44 hours per week. <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/1998/dec/wk4/art03.htm>.
- <sup>18</sup> In 1991, there were 1.6 million “latchkey kids” in the US between the ages of 5 and 14, [http://www.census.gov/apsd/www/statbrief/sb94\\_5.pdf](http://www.census.gov/apsd/www/statbrief/sb94_5.pdf).
- <sup>19</sup> <http://www.dol.gov/dol/esa/public/youth/cltour1.htm>
- <sup>20</sup> *The Encarta® 99 New World Timeline* © Copyright 1998, Helicon Publishing Ltd.
- <sup>21</sup> "Child Labor," *Microsoft® Encarta® 97 Encyclopedia*. © 1993-1996 Microsoft Corporation.
- <sup>22</sup> Brian Harmon *Truants' parents may be charged*, *The Detroit News*, November 29, 1999, <http://www.detnews.com>.
- <sup>23</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993).
- <sup>24</sup> The man can become man only through education. He is nothing but what education makes out of him. Der Mensch kann nur Mensch werden durch Erziehung. Er ist nichts, als was die Erziehung aus ihm macht. Immanuel Kant, *Ueber Padagogik*, In Kant, *Schriften zur Antropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie. Politik und Padagogik*, <http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~kr538/kantpaed.html>.
- <sup>25</sup> Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992,184. Westbrook agrees with Robert Crunden on this point.
- <sup>26</sup> William Clinton, *The State Of The Union*, *New York Times*, January 28, 2000.
- <sup>27</sup> US Department of Education, *President's & Secretary's Priorities*, 2000, <http://www.ed.gov/inits.html>.
- <sup>28</sup> Ivan Illich, *De-Schooling Society*, New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

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<sup>29</sup> Grace Llewellyn, *The teenage liberation handbook: how to quit school and get a real life and education* (Eugene, Ore.: Lowry House, 1991).

<sup>30</sup> Article 4 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states: “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude.” Paradoxically, the same declaration, in Article 26 says: “Elementary education shall be compulsory.” I see an obvious contradiction here, for compulsory education if it is a form of labor is also servitude. – <http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/lang/eng.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander Sidorkin. Razvitie vospitatel'noi sistemy shkoly kak zakonomernyi protses. [Development of a school as a system: Driving Forces and Contradictions] Kand. diss., Moscow: Research Institute for Theory and History of Education, 1990.

<sup>32</sup> McLaughlin, M.W., Irby, M.A., Langman J. *Urban Sanctuaries: Neighborhood Organizations in the Lives and Futures of Inner-city Youth*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994.