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Student Labor and Evolution of Education

Schooling as a technology

Schooling in its contemporary form is but one particular phase of a technology of teaching. Although most social animals can transmit significant knowledge to their young, humans have developed a process of conscious separation of important knowledge from unimportant. While human babes possess significant capacity and powerful instinct to learn, teaching is a way of channeling this ability into carefully selected sets of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Let me break the evolution of teaching into three stages: apprenticeship, classical schooling, and mass schooling. The first stage involves systematic, deliberate teaching, but does not have a specific social institution dedicated to teaching; teaching is embedded into the production process. This type of education appears first, but never completely disappears, and is still with us today.

Classical schooling was the next step in refining the technology of teaching, associated with large societies with complex social structures. Emergence of state and its ruling classes is generally linked with beginning of organized schooling. Schooling evolved as an essentially selective technology; it implied and reproduces teaching a narrow class of schooled people to manage the complex society. Schooling added another dimension to the exploitation of childhood; use of force and threat of exclusion. The revolutionary significance of schooling is that it forces children to work beyond what the natural learning drive of childhood compel them to do. The difference in social status between schooled and unschooled classes as a great extrinsic motivator allowing the society to cram even more knowledge into selected few heads. Schooling turned learning into a form of labor.

Generally speaking, any activity that does not bring an immediate satisfaction of human needs is labor. Anything that we are not doing for fun and pleasure is labor, a systematic, planned activity regulated by postponed, indirect, and often complexly mediated desires. Once students cease to perceive learning as play, pleasure, and satisfaction of their personal curiosity, what they do in schools becomes labor.

Schooling is a form of artificially extending childhood as the time for learning beyond biologically determined first 10-12 years of life span. The needs of growing literacy civilizations demanded to go farther than already generously lengthy period of childhood allotted to humans. At the same time, the work of schooled children had to be intensified beyond levels sustainable by natural curiosity, play and social connection. In a certain sense, the classical schooling is a revolution similar to the Neolithic revolution, the move from hunting and gathering to agriculture and animal domestication. In both cases, humans exhausted the ways of natural resource exploitation, and took upon themselves to reproduce the needed resources artificially. Schooling is a way of producing more of childhood—both quantitatively and qualitatively—childhood understood as a capacity to learn outside of actual productive processes.

Mass schooling is an entirely new phase of educational technology; it is very young in historical terms, and its long-term success is still uncertain. Its aims are really paradoxical and may seem unachievable. Mass schooling seeks to force all children do what only elites used to do *because* they were the elites. The class difference was indeed the engine inside the technology of classical schooling; the promise of social advancement and the threat of expulsion were the simple and reliable carrot and stick of a traditional school. With the shift to mass schooling, a new engine, a new motivating force had to be created, and it has been created, as I will later show.

It is important to emphasize that classical schooling and mass schooling are two very different social technologies. They may appear remarkably similar, and coexist within the same society, and yet these are two different approaches to exploitation of childhood as a natural resource. They are no more similar than competitive running is to jogging for exercise: in both cases people run, but the motive, the aim, the attitude, the meaning are quite different. The classical school was and is motivated by the drive to advance socially. The mass schooling uses some of the mythology of social advancement, but it is quite clear that the majority of students cannot advance above average without creating the Wobegon Effect, where all the children are above average. This is why the ideology of social mobility does not have much credence among the lowest social classes: poor kids may not like school, but they understand that no matter how much you learn, someone has to remain at the bottom. Social advancement is by definition a relative concept; one can advance above others, so the others have to remain at the bottom.

What mechanisms does the mass schooling use? How does it differ from previous ways of using the resource of childhood? What is a likely path of evolution of mass schooling?

The technology of mass schooling

I begin with a simple question: why do students do their work associated with schooling? Why do they come to school every day, read books, write essays, fill out bubble-sheets, etc? Of course, not all of them, and not all the time, but the degree of compliance of contemporary children is quite remarkable. One only has to remember that none of them are getting paid for doing all these things, and most of school activities are not fun at all.

My interest is very far from examining learning motivation in the psychological sense, which is covered extensively in the educational psychology literature. Rather, I would like to consider it as an economic question. Schoolwork does not serve any immediate needs of the worker, and therefore does not fall into the category of immediately rewarding activities like eating, resting, or having sex. It does still rely on exploiting the three gifts of childhood, especially in the early grades: the need for a caregiver, curiosity, and play still play an important role in mass schooling. However, just like the classical type of schooling, mass schooling goes well beyond the distance to which the gifts of childhood can propel. Schoolwork does not usually satisfy such needs as the need for entertainment, or curiosity. Of course, schoolwork may entertain or fascinate, but we may safely assume that in most cases, especially in higher grades, it does not. Many students do their work anyway, and I want to understand why.

When individuals engage into large-scale, systematic, and prolonged activities that do not bring any immediate satisfaction, this could be considered work (labor), and an economic explanation could reasonably be expected. Many policymakers and practitioners base their understanding of schooling on a misleading analogy: students (and their parents) are consumers who receive educational services from schools. Schools are public or private service providers—the analogy goes—who serve the client. No doubt, schools can be understood in such a way. However, this is not a particularly useful analogy. The truth is, most students perceive school as a chore, and rightfully so. School learning is something one has to do, like taking out trash, or doing dishes, or cleaning one's room. This is something they are required to do, something that eats away at free time, energy, takes years to complete, does not bring much pleasure, and consists of tasks that are almost impossible to connect to any future use.

It used to annoy me to no end when students expect certain grade for certain amount of academic work. It just struck me one day that they maybe right if one to look at academic work as a form of labor. There are customary levels of work that normally yield an equivalent of an "A" or a "B," and if a teacher violates these levels, students perceive it as unfair raising the price of a grade measured in the amount of work required.

I have argued elsewhere that from the macroeconomic point of view, K-12 students provide much more services than they receive.¹ The schoolwork is really a chore performed by students rather than a service provided to them, because the economic benefits of students' efforts are enjoyed mostly by their future employers. Yet even if one refutes this claim, and work of students is found to benefit them significantly in the future, one still has to describe what students do as a self-serving labor, not an act of receiving services. Simply put, students do most of the work associated with learning. They greatly outnumber teachers and administrators, while working for about the same time, or greater number of hours per day, counting the homework. If school would be a restaurant, a patron would have to bring her own groceries, rent a stove and pots, cook her own food, serve herself a dinner, and clean the dishes when done. Of course, there would be still an element of service provided here: the restaurant would provide supervision, advice, and assistance. However, the client would rightfully walk away with a feeling that she worked—for her own benefit, and with outside assistance, but still the element of work greatly outweighs the element of service. I will assume from this point on that schoolwork is work, and that schools should be considered not service providing organizations, but places of employment for students.

Students, teachers, and administrators can be viewed as economic agents. School as an economic system organizes production, distribution and consumption of goods and services. The most obvious observable feature of school life is organized, sustained labor performed by students and teachers. If teachers' economic motivation is relatively easy to explain, it is not the case with the students' motives. Some hidden economic mechanisms compel most students to put in long hours of schoolwork and homework. People work for a reason, and the understanding of reasons behind human work is probably the only way to attribute rationality to their work. These reasons, as we will see later, are much more

complex than work for a paycheck, yet it would be implausible to assume no reason at all. An economic motive is behind student efforts and I will show these motives.

Economic anthropology

Mass schools have more in common with what economists used to call archaic or traditional economies. The small field of economic anthropology can provide a much more useful set of tools for education than the mainstream economic theory. Economic ethnography seems to take off with influential works of economic historian Karl Polanyi,² although Marcel Mousse and Bronislaw Malinowski greatly contributed to Polanyi's thinking. Malinowski's study of the economy of the Trobriand Islands off the east coast of New Guinea has probably been cited more often than any other single ethnographic research in the discussions within the economic anthropology.³ Malinowski describes Kula trade as an example of an intricate economic system that involves reciprocal exchanges of goods and services without determining the exact value of each object. In fact, some objects have no use-value at all; their only value is association with former owners.⁴ Polanyi convincingly shows that the concept of market and market exchange is not simply applicable to many economies.

Polanyi critiques Adam Smith for the assumption of man's "propensity to barter, truck and exchange one thing for another." "In retrospect—writes Polanyi—it can be said that no misreading of the past ever proved more prophetic of the future."⁵ Polanyi argues that both historical and anthropological data show market economies to be an exception rather than the rule. For tens of thousands of years, men and women acted not in pursuit of their individual material interest, but on other considerations:

The outstanding discovery of recent historical and anthropological research is that man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships. He does not act as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets. He values material goods only in so far as they serve his end. Neither the process of production nor that of distribution is linked to specific economic interests attached to the possession of goods; but every single step in that process is geared to a number of social interests which eventually ensure that that the required step be taken.⁶

Polanyi develops this idea further by considering both ethnographic data and economic history. He names four principles on which an economy could be based: market principle, redistribution, reciprocity, and householding. The market principle implies buying and selling of goods and services and is based on the interplay of supply and demand. This is what most of economic theory considers economy, and what dominates the industrialized world. The other principles have governed most of human societies for most of their existence, and probably still regulate most of economic activity on this planet.

Reciprocity is exchange in which the giver either does not expect anything at all in return (generalized reciprocity), or expects some return, some time in the future (balanced reciprocity). An example of the former variety in the contemporary society would be economic relations within an extended family; an example of the latter is a group of friends, who expect to help each other move and take each other to the airport, or counsel each other on financial and romantic matters, but avoid keeping track of who owes whom how much in terms of the performed labor.

Redistribution involves movement of products from individual and collective producers to some center, which then redistributes the products and sends them back to localities. Redistribution occurs when a tribe leader collects food and other products from all, and then redistributes them according to need, influence, and other considerations. This type of economy is only possible when most people accept the need for one central figure or a group to figure out the redistribution mechanisms; it may not be confused with direct violence of one group over another as in cases of conquest and cast domination. Ancient Egypt and the Soviet Union would be examples of such economies. Taxes and public services will probably be the closest example in developed capitalist economies. There is no need to mention that tax-based sector of economy has significantly grown since the times of Adam Smith. The principle of householding applies to families that produce everything for their own consumption. Later, Polanyi seems to include this principle into one of the above.

The economic anthropologists have done some interesting work since Polanyi,⁷ and I do not intend to survey the field in this paper. However, I find the fundamental intuition they share remarkable and very useful in educational theory. Richard Wilk has summarized it as follows: economic anthropologists “are interested in people because they are both rational and cultural, because they pursue both money and morality.”⁸ A convincing answer to my question about student motivation must treat students as rational beings who will work if it makes sense for them to work. However, it would be a gross simplification to apply here the principles of economic motivation endemic to the market economies.

Instead of the somewhat archaic term “archaic economy,” I will call these non-market economies relational, because the key feature of such systems is that the economy is submerged, or integrated into the larger sphere of social relations. (Marcel Mauss describes it as “total social phenomena”⁹) We can see islands of relational economies in most contemporary societies, even in the United States. There are many instances of reciprocal cooperation outside of market. For example, most forms of friendship involve exchange of certain services. Neighbors often form de-facto cooperatives that involve mutual obligations. In working class and poor neighborhoods, people still rely on relatives, friends and neighbors for essential services like babysitting, moving, car repair, security, marital counseling, entertainment, information distribution, etc. Teenagers almost universally form groups not devoid of economic function. Members of such cliques, gangs, and loosely organized groups of friends depend on each other to provide and receive extensive educational services, psychological and career counseling, entertainment, and security.

In non-western societies, even those who superficially embraced market economic models, the sphere of relational economies may be greater in the order of magnitude. For example, in my native Russia, mutual obligations of kinship and friendship very often outweigh purely monetary motives. What Westerners often regard as corruption, often turns out to be culturally determined blend of market and relational economies.

One common feature of relational economies is that the act of providing service to others both implies reciprocity, and avoids any exact stipulations on timing or quantity of the reciprocal service. We “invest” in our friends more as an act of insurance against future unforeseen needs. I want to emphasize as strongly as I can the non-market orientation of the relational economies. However, one should not forget that these are still economic phenomena. When my family asks neighbors to take in our cat for a couple of weeks, both sides are perfectly aware of the economic condition of such an agreement. We are indebted, and there is an expectation of a returned favor. However, we are both aware of the fact that the debt may never be returned, or returned in entirely different form. When the neighbors do us a favor, we create a bond that no market theory can explain or measure.

It is not my intension to idealize the relational sphere of economy. It could be just as exploitative and corrupt as the market sphere. It certainly cannot replace the market, on which we rely for most essential goods and services. Market is remarkably efficient and flexible in organizing the large portions of the contemporary society. However, it is not the only and not the universal economic mechanism. Moreover, a society totally void of relational economy is hardly an ideal. I want to establish two facts: the relational economies still exist, and their mechanisms are very different from the market economies.

The economic anthropology of mass schooling

Economically speaking, regular American public schools are much closer to tribes of the Pacific described by Malinowski than to corporations located nearby. Their economic relations are embedded in other social relations. For a variety of reasons, schools cannot and should not develop into true market economies, which does not mean that they cannot improve the types of economies they do have. The motivation that moves mass schooling is based on relational economy where mutual obligations, communal commitments, delicate balances of customary work, rituals of identity and power blend into one social structure.

A successful school is an economic system where schoolwork is an integral part of social relations, and the bulk of social relations is integrated into the functioning of school as an organization. In other words, the secret of the remarkable performance of an average school is in its ability to link social practices of children and adolescents with the formal practices of teaching, learning, and administration. Like with any economic relations, students here have direct interest in remaining at school. In most crude terms, students exchange their labor of schoolwork for the opportunity to build social relations with peers and adults. The successful school is one where teachers insinuated themselves in the

social network of children's and adolescent society. Kids will do the chore of schoolwork if and only if they receive something in return. This is a common feature of all economic behaviors; there is no reason why it should not apply to schools.

Teachers and school administrators use both reciprocity and redistribution principles. Reciprocity is most commonly used in a single classroom; the mechanisms of redistribution is more prevalent for a whole school. Let me give some examples to illustrate how these two principles may work.

Reciprocity is more often used in direct relationships between a teacher and a student. Most teachers realize that the formal teacher authority is not nearly enough to maintain order in classroom, let alone to ensure even moderate learning. Teachers thus engage into an ancient game of mutual favors: they do favors to students, while students implicitly agree to repay with good behavior and reasonable effort in schoolwork. The services teachers provide could be very diverse; they simply depend on what students may want, and what a teacher can offer. Sometimes students just want personal attention, sometimes some tokens of respect and affection. Little kids want hugs, older kids need a sympathetic ear; everyone needs recognition. They might be interested in what teachers know and what teachers can do. Teachers lend them influence, connections, advice, or recognition. Teachers can give them praise, candy and stickers. Teachers can teach them how to play a new game or tell them something new about their athlete hero. Teachers may have information they need, or can keep secrets. In short, a child and adolescent may want a million small and big things from an adult. The trick is not so much to figure out what they want and what teachers have, but to initiate the exchange. In other words, having the merchandise does not automatically guarantee a deal. Not unlike adult relational economies, the economy of school relation will work only when it is well oiled with personal trust.

The principle of redistribution comes into play when educators capitalize on their central position within the school's social organization. An example of redistributive economic relationship in school is a school dance. Students may want to attend the dance for their own reasons, which has nothing to do with adults. Nevertheless, they recognize the need for organization, space, security, finance, etc. In other words, in order to obtain the good of attending a dance, they need the mediating and regulating role of the school's adult authorities. Everyone contributed to the success of the dance. In a certain sense, students exchange services, but adults are needed to regulate the exchange. Again, teachers and administrators need to insinuate themselves personally into the event of the dance, so that the mediating services they provide will be associated with specific persons rather than with a faceless institutions. Such an association creates the relationship of mutual obligation, which can be later turned into good behavior and schoolwork efforts. Students contribute their labor of school learning to teachers much like Ancient Egyptians used to build tombs for their pharaohs. It was pragmatically senseless, but economically necessary part of the society. The pharaohs needed the god-like authority to distribute food and goods effectively. Students will only invest in collective teacher authority if the authority will be used to stimulate effective exchange of services among students. Of

course, this logic applies not only to dances, but also to other events of school life, such as homecoming rituals, proms, etc.

Administrative production

The relational economy of schooling is evolving from small-scale, largely patriarchal labor arrangements to large-scale, state-controlled public work projects. Student labor can also be considered within an economic framework Rhoda Halperin calls administrative production. She describes a village of Chan Kom in the Yucatan peninsula, where “every male was required to perform *fagina* labor as a public service without remuneration.”¹⁰ Performance of this service was required to maintain residence and status, including right to communal land. Halperin cites an earlier study of the village which noticed that “the most public spirited do more than others.” She comments: “The measure of ‘public spiritedness’ was directly proportional to a citizen’s tolerance for servility, and willingness to perform *fagina* became a litmus test indicating loyalty to the *comissario*, who functions as a patron to his loyal village clients.”¹¹ Of course, *comissarios* regulated *fagina* and ultimately found a way of using it for their own benefit. The whole relationship is based on the monopoly on land which allowed the elites to control labor.

Students work in schools is not unlike the administratively regulated *fagina*. Each student is obliged to work several hours each day, and the measure of his or her dedication is proportional to the loyalty to adult authorities. A combination of purely administrative sanctions (such as detentions, reprimand, etc.) and an ideological pressure (“stay in school” propaganda) is used to maintain the labor. Yet, as it is in Mexican village, in American school, the success of *fagina* depends on whether the educators found a way of controlling the resource of social life schools provide. Obviously, in small, rural communities, schools control much of social interaction among students. The schools there effectively control the cultural life of the community through athletic events, and much of other entertainment output. In addition, schools can relatively easy control parents by a threat of creating a negative image of the family should students refuse to cooperate. The same mechanism cannot work in an urban setting, simply because schools do not control as much social resources. Students have plenty opportunities to socialize outside of school; parents’ communities are fragmented, and not dependent on schools to maintain social status. Quite often, racial and class divide separates teachers from students and parents, which makes loyalty to school authorities socially unacceptable. In such circumstances, student work becomes closer to forced labor than to the patriarchal *fagina*.

The difference between *fagina* and a totalitarian communist society is only in the scale. The tendency of contemporary public schooling in the United States is to rely more and more on forms of direct administrative control of student labor without providing the benefits that traditional relational economies provide. For example, one of the biggest resources a school can provide to its students is providing a place, a reason, and organization to communicate with friends. However, there is a clear tendency to shorten the time of recess, to limit opportunities of interaction among students, to close the doors

of school earlier, etc. This is not simply a case of myopia, and not only a result of unwise teacher unions. What we see is a shift from one form of relational economy to another.

More and more total labor becomes learning labor. A laborer first manufactures himself as a future means of production; this takes much more time and immeasurably more effort than was the case for the majority of population even a hundred years ago. There is just much more labor to be done, and it looks like the relational economies of the archaic type are no longer able to deliver such quantities of labor. In the future, if the tendency holds, more and more people will spend more and more productive years of their lives in schools rather than at work. Public schools are already state socialist institutions, with all the ensuing problems of administrative control and lack of worker motivation.

In the Soviet Union, large sections of economy were regulated by market mechanisms, and the archaic relational economies of reciprocity. However, it has always used the direct non-economical force to maintain the needed levels of labor motivation. This need may arise in American public schools as well, if more and more police will be required to maintain control over students, and more and more draconian laws will be passed in to force students to perform.

Implications for school improvement/reform

The large and efficient public education may pose a totalitarian threat to democratic societies. My proposal is to develop more of a social-democratic model of schooling, where the government does not minutely controls the production process through direct intervention (such as accountability measures), yet ensures a more equitable redistribution of the benefits of learning. Essentially, we need to revisit the archaic non-market economies, and make them much more efficient than before. Perhaps we need to study the economic systems of non-market societies, especially those with long and stable history, and try to understand how people can be motivated to work outside of money-based market economies.

Schools must examine what sorts of assets they need to provide students with benefits sufficient to maintain social control and ensure the acceptable level of learning. Public must realize that significant investment in extracurricular programs must be made. These programs had to be closely associated with schools, so the relational capital built there could be easily converted into incentives for learning. Both in theory and practice of education, adults must learn to treat students as rational beings, who will work when it makes sense to work. At the same time, what makes sense to a laborer in market economy, may not necessarily be applicable to a student who works in a non-market, non-cash economy of schools. The international economic development organizations are slowly realizing that to improve standards of living in the developing world, one needs to improve the local, non-market economies first. The same logic should be applied to the efforts of school reform and school improvement.

The current accountability reform is an attempt to apply methods of Soviet-style command economy to public schooling. The authors and proponents of these reforms

believe that we can increase productivity of student labor by urging them to be more productive. As someone who experienced the command economy in real life, I can testify that no amount of demands, higher expectations, appeals to ethical obligations, and motivational speeches will produce higher motivation, or increase productivity. Although incessant propaganda may create short-term enthusiasm about a particular educational model, it ultimately fails to motivate workers.

Both Democrats and Republicans believe it will work, which is a truly unfortunate, although an easily explainable fallacy. The captains of the most advanced market economy in the world cannot see the vitality of other forms of economic motivation. Their reasoning is that since students cannot really be paid for their work, therefore, schools fall out entirely out of the economic sphere, and students should be expected to work without economic motivators. It is truly amazing that the conservatives with their belief in rational economic choices would succumb to such dramatically non-economic methods as accountability. This could be partly explained by the fact that the conservatives have very little experience with non-market relational economies, and cannot think in economic terms beyond narrow market paradigm.

Another fallacy is to include schools into macroeconomic relations through various voucher initiatives. This logic implies that if schools begin to compete, they will create a market of educational services. Not a totally unrealistic expectation, it will of course dramatically increase the inequality of education. This criticism has already been developed, and I do not wish to repeat it. However, the voucher solution completely ignores the question in the beginning of this paper. Why would students want to do their work once their parents chose the school? How would the act of choice automatically translate into an economic force that motivates students to work? In other words, it is unclear how a competition among schools will change student motivation one way or the other.

However, the economic anthropology of schooling can help develop a meaningful alternative reform program for public schools. One assumption of such a program is that schoolwork is a form of labor, and as such needs serious incentives. Learning in schools is only a part of a much more complicated web of social relationships, and cannot be treated as an isolated activity. Learning may not be changed or improved without improving the workings of entire relational economy of schools. Hence, reformers need to design certain institutional changes that would allow educators offer more services to students, and be more effective in their mediating roles. The value of peer culture and peer interaction should be recognized, and systematic efforts must be made to integrate it with the sphere of academic learning. Teachers cannot be simply expected to create good personal relationships with their students out of nothing. Schools need to provide many opportunities for teachers to interact with students outside of traditional classroom setting. The reform needs to counteract the tendency to cut down the non-academic time out of the school day. Rather, the non-academic time should be much better organized, and much better funded. The idea that roles of a teacher, of a social worker, of a school counselor, and of a neighborhood club organizer should belong to different people has to be reconsidered. While market economies always benefit from division of labor, in the

non-market relational economies the opposite is true. Only combining several functions in the person of a teacher can assure that teachers can both receive and dispense services. Of course, such a reform program requires an acknowledgement that aims of education go well beyond preparation of skilled workforce.

NOTES

¹ Alexander Sidorkin, "Labor of Learning," *Educational Theory* 51, Winter 2001, Number 1, 91-108.

² Karl Polanyi, *Primitive, Archaic, and Modern Economies*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1968.

³ Bronislaw Malinowski. *Argonauts of the western Pacific; an account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, London: G. Routledge, 1922

⁴ Karl Polanyi, *Primitive, Archaic, and Modern Economies*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1968, 200.

⁵ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1957, 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷ See, for example, Susana Narotzky, *New directions in economic anthropology*. London: Pluto Press, 1997.

⁸ Richard R. Wilk, *Economies and cultures : foundations of economic anthropology*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), xi.

⁹ Marcel Mauss, *The gift; forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*, (Glencoe, Ill: Free Press, 1954).

¹⁰ Rhoda Halperin, *Economies Across Cultures: Toward a Comparative Science of the Economy*, (New York: St.Martins Press, 1988), 120.

¹¹ *Ibid.*