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### The Political Economy of Educational Innovation

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#### Abstract

Throughout North America and the world, educators are awash in urgings and suggestions about how to change what they do and how they do it. “Challenges” and “crises” are identified and elaborated. Teachers are made to feel embarrassed if they are unaware of “cutting-edge technologies” and uninformed about profound demographic and attitudinal shifts among their “customers” and “clients.” The result is an addition to novelty that poses problems of its own. Innovations in education must be understood and assessed in context. Instead of judging whether new educational theories and practices produce measurable improvements in the success of educational programs (higher achievement in learning, more efficient “curriculum delivery,” lower attrition rates, and so on), it is first necessary to establish the material conditions under which education happens, the normative values it carries with it, and the social interests it serves. Like every other human project, education is not “value-free,” but is inherently biased—philosophically, politically and economically. To undertake a thoughtful discussion of educational change requires a preliminary exploration of the political economy of education—an inquiry into the ways in which educational policies and applied pedagogy support larger general or special interests, and either uncritically support or critically interrogate deep patterns of social and cultural power and authority. The invitation to critical analysis is followed by a suggestion that education does not suffer from a lack of innovation, but from a failure to see and act upon the need for renovation.

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### The Ambiguous Ethics of Innovation

The concept of innovation is reductively defined in an otherwise helpful internet dictionary as something “new and different.” Such a simple, wholly transportable, weed-like definition begs clarification. Upon further investigation, it seems that innovation can mean anything from doing old things in new ways (Smith, 1976) to doing something substantially different in traditional ways (Stanley, 1992; McLaren, 2005; Welton, 2005). It can imply the tactical use of novel methods—intellectual, organizational or technological—to achieve longstanding purposes, or it can involve nothing less than revolutionary changes not only in instrumental means, but also in fundamental ends.

With such a wide range of possible interpretations, sceptics may

be forgiven for asking a potential “change champion” some serious questions: Are you trying to achieve uncontroversial objectives in a more efficient or effective manner? Are you seeking to redefine goals according to some set of radical (or reactionary) social, political or philosophical principles? Or, are you engaged in some project that will transform both the way we do things and the nature of what we intend to do?

Absent answers to such questions, innovation quickly becomes an ostensibly “value-free” notion to be evaluated by measurable criteria of success or failure, without taking into account the more fundamental questions: “Innovation for what purpose and innovation in whose interest?” After all, as we all know (or should know), there is no such thing as a completely “value-free” innovation. Every change, no matter how apparently inconsequential, alters the sum of social reality. Every significant change can help transform whole societies—and the world.

Movable type made the publishing of books more expeditious (and led to the Protestant Reformation). Postage stamps made the delivery of written messages easier (and facilitated democratic reform by enabling subversive conspiracies). Locomotives changed the way we moved people and products (and helped to build the Industrial Revolution and, incidentally, to destroy aboriginal cultures in North America). Albert Einstein’s musings about relativity led to the atom bomb (which resulted in the immediate vaporization of well over 100,000 people and the eventual deaths of another 400,000, brought World War II to a prompt close, and prompted an economically devastating arms race that continued until the implosion of the Soviet Union and—in a somewhat different guise—is still with us today). The growth of non-governmental organizations has partly restructured the global political economy by adding the new dimension of “civil society” into a mix that was once almost exclusively the preserve of corporate wealth (private or state capitalism) and authoritative power (sovereign governments), often supplemented with (or undermined by) religious doctrines and dogmas. The Internet is now transforming the way in which we communicate with our friends, perform academic research, raise funds for noble causes and co-ordinate terrorism). With such dramatic examples in mind, who can deny that frequently connected social, technical and intellectual innovations also have profound effects on our society, and raise questions of the deepest moral and ethical importance?

What is true for issues such as war and peace, wealth and poverty, globalization, communications, transportation and environmental degradation is also true for matters of immediate and practical importance to individuals, families and communities. Advances in manufacturing and marketing have helped Wal-Mart displace small greengrocers, and hardware stores and local pharmacies. Birth control devices have altered sexual mores and marriage, and it is arguable that e-mails and text-messaging have increased the frequency of written communications while

simultaneously undermining basic literacy, especially among the young.

### **Innovations in Education**

Going one step further, what is true for merchandising, personal relationships and the electronic exchange of data is also true for education. Institutions from preschools to postdoctoral research facilities do not seem to look like (or to behave like) they did, even in the very recent past. As people born before the baby boomers and the bomb, we can attest to the fact that children of our era could not even be guaranteed an available kindergarten, and most were finished with formal instruction at or soon after the age of sixteen; by contrast, present-day young people are expected to enjoy some form of preschool experience, to complete secondary school and to carry on to some sort of postsecondary education or training. High-school drop-out rates of more than 50% were once the norm; now they are deemed unacceptable and made the focus of special rescue projects. Postsecondary institutions obsessively attend to attrition and retention rates, sometimes finding that their funding depends on the rate of student "success" (defined as the completion of required courses, the achievement of passing grades and the acquisition of paper credentials with or without excessive interest in the quality, depth or breadth of what these students actually learn).

Other changes are evident. While in school, strict rules used to be applied concerning sitting in straight rows, and uttering no sound or making no sudden movement without raising a hand and being acknowledged by the teacher. The elementary school teachers we encountered in the late 1940s and early 1950s would be astonished by today's classrooms, where children appear to wander about aimlessly and chat amiably with their classmates, while teachers and volunteer teachers' aides move easily from group to group, and guide generations of allegedly self-directed learners toward attainable age-appropriate goals. The school principals of our day would not have known how to react to hirsute teachers in jeans (or at least not in a politically correct manner). As well, the university professors with whom we studied in the early to mid-1960s would be alarmed that students today could graduate with a handsome degree without once having had to write more than a six-page "essay." They would all find it appalling that young people could spend sixteen years in a duly certified education system without ever taking a serious course in history or geography.

Plainly, something is up. Innovation in substance and method is being encouraged by educational experts and the authorities who promote novel pedagogical practices. Teachers and students alike are urged to engage in the relentless use of PowerPoint presentations in the classroom. Administrative accountability measures are regularly stressed. Student evaluations of teachers are collected and analyzed. CD-ROMs appear to be as popular as books, and electronic learning devices can be effortlessly located beside Internet-friendly computers

in school libraries (now often restyled “learning resource centres” or “learning commons”).

The value of each innovation in classroom management, learning resources and acceptable standards of decorum among teachers and students is, of course, debatable on its own merits. Traditionalists and progressives can ably acquit themselves in the continuing contest about whether schooling has adapted well or badly to changing social circumstances. Summoned up in such discussions will be cultural, demographic and economic data that are said to define the environment in which institutional innovation occurs. Some will be reluctant and others will be enthusiastic participants in the transformation of what it means to teach and what it means to learn in a society in which superficial neophilia has become endemic, and change (insistently called “progress”) is commonly considered to be irresistible.

What we contend in this article is that discrete arguments about specific innovations may be of considerable and immediate interest to educators and to those who are in schools, who have children or grandchildren in schools, or who have an abiding interest in the future of schools. Such “stakeholders” have an unshakable desire to determine whether educational transformations are tonic or toxic for the well-being of current and upcoming generations. Such arguments, however, tend to be isolated, issue-specific and disconnected from larger concerns about the broad policies and from thoughtful discussion of what the primary and fundamental purpose of education ought to be. Our preference is for more a comprehensive argument.

### **Assessing Innovations in Education**

Choosing to emphasize mathematics and science at the cost of the arts and humanities, choosing to pay greater attention to multiculturalism at the cost of traditional historical narratives, and choosing to embrace whole language as opposed to phonetic methods in the teaching of reading and creative writing are all tremendously important decisions for educators, parents and students. They are controversial matters upon which reasonable people may reasonably differ. They are also, however, secondary, derivative and of little consequence in the absence of a broader focus. In order to evaluate educational innovation, it is insufficient to judge some new policy or process without taking into account terms that are pre-established as constituting the fundamental mandate and social purpose of formal education. It is one thing to discover whether this or that practice helps achieve a measurable goal economically, and quite another to determine whether that measurable goal is one that ought to be achieved. As Michael Bérubé (2006: 221) has recently observed, the human “faculty of instrumental reason, left to its own devices without any moral mooring, can sit down one day and try to figure out the most rational and efficient method for exterminating Jews.” Less melodramatic, but no less profound, are the words of conservative philosopher George Grant (1969: 113): “the curriculum is

the essence of the university.” It must be treated with care and deliberations. Its authors must be reflective.

What was true for universities a generation ago, applies equally to colleges today. At present, however, less through postmodern relativism than through modernist instrumentalism, we suffer from what may be an unrecoverable loss of essence. As Grant added, “the curriculum is itself chiefly determined by what the dominant classes of the society consider important to be known.” Increasingly, ruling class ideology forms the implicit and explicit core of education in theory and in practice, and that ideology, Grant insisted, is to sustain the “technological dynamic within the context of the ... state capitalist structure.”

One of the principal means through which the hegemonic ideology is maintained is the process of denial. Authorities urge that all forms of bias, prejudice and subjective beliefs be excluded from the classroom. Teachers are admonished to keep their private opinions to themselves, and to maintain an air of dispassionate objectivity, especially when discussing contentious issues. Like the pundits and proselytizers at Fox News, they are urged to be “fair and balanced.” Cleverly hidden, of course, is the fact that the so-called “objective” information that is purveyed is not objective at all, but the sum and substance of corporate thinking about everything from zoology to anthropology.

Any meaningful discussion of the “purpose” of education is therefore finessed, and is too often taken for granted. When they are discussed at all, such “philosophical” matters are generally dismissed with a few desultory remarks in the opening paragraphs of government directives, college calendars and speeches at local school board meetings. They may take the form of banal bromides about prosperity, tolerance, progress, responsibility, democracy and, on a good day, a call to be conscientious custodians of the planet. They may also appeal to practicalities such as preparation for employment and openness to lifelong learning. Too frequently, however, the aims of education are reduced to the advocacy of merely individual goals such as developing personal potential and self-esteem, supporting emotional and psychological growth, furthering values of respect for others, promoting cooperation and fostering perseverance. In general, students are urged to build positive character traits, and to acquire mastery of pertinent knowledge in carefully defined academic and vocational fields. Moreover, even these commonplace elements of what passes for a philosophy of education are normally expressed in banal clichés, consigned to tedious preambles and never taken seriously as appropriate subjects of deep consideration or reconsideration. Instead, the attentive public is urged to be generically pragmatic, and to get on with the job—irrespective of what that “job” might entail.

In order to open an authentic debate about educational adjustments, adaptations and transformations, it is first necessary to

place education in a context that will allow it to be fully described and rigorously analyzed from an external perspective. The currently fashionable phrase of “thinking outside the box” may come to mind, but it is inadequate for our purposes. Thinking outside the box implies achieving freedom from traditional practices in order to preserve or expand the material contents of the box itself. It urges us to devise new methods to protect or extend the “values” that are contained therein. In the alternative, we should first consider the merits of what the box contains, and how it relates to other items on the shelf. Perhaps we should consider the shelf and the even larger structure in which it is located to be problematic. A critical discussion about greater purposes is crucial to any judgment about particular strategies, tactics and methods, much less any particular container.

Rather than contemplating unusual solutions to predefined problems, it is also required of us to discern who determines what counts and what does not count as a legitimate problem in the first place. We must discover whose material interests are at stake, and who will benefit from the application of an ingenious putative improvement. We must address the timeless question: Cui bono? To conduct an efficient interrogation, it is helpful to approach the matter from the standpoint of what is called political economy.

### **Political Economy**

The phrase “political economy” does not carry the same meaning to all people. It is, of course, less elastic than “innovation,” but it may denote different emphases as an academic discipline. From the Canadian perspective, it is most often associated with a tradition that is represented in the work of Harold Adams Innis (1894-1952) and his colleagues. Innis had been influenced by sociologists George Herbert Mead, Robert E. Park and especially Thorstein Veblen, while a graduate student at the University of Chicago. Back home in Canada, he was appointed Chair of the University of Toronto’s Department of Political Economy in 1937, and he went on to exert tremendous influence within his own university and beyond. His dense tomes on subjects such as the fur trade and the cod fisheries in Canada not only told us more than most people needed or wanted to know about these resource-based industries, but they also exhibited his “staples thesis,” the theory that much could be learned about Canadian culture and social institutions from a meticulous examination of the effects of an economy rooted in the extraction and export of “staple” products. These included not only fish and fur, but timber, wheat, minerals, fossil fuels and, potentially, fresh water as well (Innis, 1930; Innis, 1940; Easterbrook & Watkins, 1984, Kroker, 1984).

As Innis’ further exploration of communications (and the sponsorship of his protégé Marshall McLuhan) attests, however, he was anything but a dogmatic thinker or a rigid determinist. To argue that social and technological structures of economic production and attendant institutions of political power decisively influence other

aspects of social development is far different from making a vulgar distinction between an economic base and a cultural or ideological superstructure, as some unduly reductionist disciples of Karl Marx have occasionally done. There is at least a recognizable measure of autonomy to be found in the symbolic domains of art, law, philosophy, politics, religion and, of course, education.

By seeking to focus attention on political economy, therefore, we are not seeking to make the absurd case that each and every cultural practice can be deduced wholly and exclusively from an analysis of how goods and services are produced and distributed in a given society. The study of society is best accomplished through empirical observation and inductive reasoning. The deductive methods of abstract mathematics or theology, which proceed from abstract and axiomatic “givens” to elaborate applications of preternatural assumptions about life and events in the everyday world most often betoken closed minds and intellectual indolence. There are, in short, no immutable scientific laws of historical evolution from which we can deduce the nature of specific cultural arrangements and practices including those associated with education.

For our purposes, nonetheless, an exploration of political economy is an essential (and probably “the” essential) element in the study of education. It does not tell us everything, but it does tell us more than other approaches about what is ultimately determinative of educational theory and practice. It is also an element that is ideologically excluded, conveniently ignored, heedlessly marginalized or actively suppressed in most “official” accounts of schooling and the assessment of educational innovations (Rae, 2005; Barrett & Doughty, 2005).

### **Education and the Process of Production**

Inherent in the organization of formal schooling is the wish to reproduce the class system partly by exhibiting the dominant hierarchical model of power relationships within the day to day life of the school, and partly by teaching students what they will need to know in order to fulfill their fate as members of their social class. This is something of a truism, and causes no stir when used to examine past educational systems from Plato’s Academy to Medieval Monasteries and from the earliest universities to Dickensian schools of the sort overseen by the fictional Thomas Gradgrind, the execrably philistine school master in the novel *Hard Times*. The subject becomes somewhat more sensitive when we approach our own era. Still, most of us can accept the basic nature and structure of educational change.

At one time, we are happy to acknowledge, young European aristocrats were taught the quadrivium and the trivium as befitted members of the governing class. Somewhat later, as “schooling was extended to young males mostly ... workers were taught the many benefits of physical labour and the blessings of class divisions within

the developing capitalist urban centers” (Segall, 2005: 142). Access to higher education, of course, remained limited to those destined by social origin to assume positions of dominance. As for those fated to remain socially immobile, as late as the 1950s a secondary school diploma was considered more than adequate for entry level employment in most occupations. Unskilled factory or outdoor manual labour, of course, required much less. Accordingly, postsecondary education was reserved for the children of the elite who could afford it, and for the relatively few among the middle and working classes whose early intellectual promise merited an opportunity to excel, and to rise above their stations. The curriculum in the universities tended toward the humanities and the established professions of religion, law and medicine. The classics prevailed, and even modern literature was excluded from the better universities until the turn of the twentieth century. Studies in science and technology were, of course, available, but they were commonly considered somewhat less prestigious.

“Sputnik,” we understand, changed all that. The competition between the USA and the USSR for dominance in military weapons and in space exploration stimulated a massive increase in financial investment in education, either directly through the creation of new institutions and the expansion of enrolment in the more venerable academies, or indirectly through the such measures as the exemplary American “GI Bill” and increased government support for student bursaries and loans.

Although emphasis on practical studies rocketed, so to speak, there remained a presumptive commitment to traditional values and to the subjects intended to promote them. A pertinent example is York University in Toronto, which accepted its first students in 1957, but achieved complete independence from the University of Toronto only with its first-year class in 1963. At least at the outset, York was committed to a “liberal education” for all its undergraduates. It endeavored, in the sexist language of the day, to contribute to the education of the “whole man” by requiring prospective students of literature and philosophy to study at least one full-year course in the social sciences and another in the natural sciences. Likewise, those destined for a career in biology or chemistry were compelled to gain exposure to the social sciences and humanities. Finally, aspirants in economics and political science were required to learn something of physics and philosophy, astronomy and art before they settled down to their chosen area of concentration. No more.

Now, specialization prevails, and the specialties tend to be those dedicated not to the emancipation of the individual and society, but to the expansion of domination over both human and non-human nature. As two of the world’s most prominent educational critics wrote: “the language of educational theory and practice is organized around a claim to authority that is primarily procedural and technical ... This is a language that ignores its own partiality, that refuses to engage the ideological assumptions that underlie its vision of the future, and that



appears unable to understand its own complicity with those social relationships that subjugate, infantilize and corrupt" (Freire and Giroux, 1989: ix).

The great transformation from classical and humanistic education to practical and vocational training was certainly sudden, but even more significant was its pairing with contemporaneous transformations in the economy. It accompanied in lock-step the transition from a resource-based, primary to an industrial, secondary and then to a knowledge-based, tertiary economy. Today, prevailing whiggish interpretations speak of the steady progress of social reform and its impact on education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and link it to the transition was from the dominance first of agriculture and natural resources and then of the manufacturing. Then, "school promoters" agitated for (and successfully achieved) the intervention of the state to give access to basic education to all children. A remarkable case of progressive thought winning the day? Not entirely.

What is seldom noticed is that compulsory schooling was not always welcomed by the working and lower classes, for it imposed formidable financial burdens in terms of fees and lost wages, and it gave no assurance of future success (Hurt, 1979: 188-213). What is also lost is the fact that school reforms had a dual purpose. One, of course, was to equip young people with the elementary literacy and numeracy skills needed to read work orders and set dials on machinery in the industrial factory system or, perhaps, to write purchase orders and to do sums in a manner adequate for the responsibilities of sales personnel and office clerks. The other was to institutionalize the children of "loose and disorderly people" in order to inculcate the tenets of respectable society including the virtues of moral rectitude, deference to authority and hard work (Prentice, 2003).

So, mass education, which is generally considered a fulfillment of the Enlightenment promise to rid the world of ignorance, can also be seen as a necessary adaptation of the educational system to provide competent and compliant workers for the enrichment of the owners of capital and the protection of property from the possibility of unruly behaviour in the hope of provoking comprehensive social reform. Even educational reforms, now deemed unqualified human goods, can be alternatively understood to have economic and political motivations that are far from emancipatory for the children involved. Today, the details have changed, but there is much that is familiar about educational growth and development (Segall, 2006).

### **The False Promise of High-tech**

Parallel claims about the progressive quality of school reform have been made for the current shift away from manufacturing. Now, however, it seems that more is required than reading, writing, arithmetic and moral indoctrination. Instead, students are increasingly expected to complete high school and go on to college or university

with the intent of becoming contributors to the new, highly competitive, knowledge-based, technology-driven global economy—complete with its emphasis on “people skills” and its prerequisite of computer literacy.

Just as the nineteenth-century promised individual material advancement to those with the wit and the will to parlay their elementary school proficiencies into respectable work, so late-twentieth-century students were led to expect opportunities for fulfilling jobs involving the application of creative imagination and “cool” technology. The high-tech future promised employment that would be lucrative as well as rewarding—intellectually emotionally and financially.

Instead, no less than a quarter-century ago, labour market researchers had already discovered a distressing trend. The glowing future pledged by the high-tech industries was very likely an illusion from the outset. Yes, there would be a modest increase in opportunities for a few extremely gifted, imaginative and inventive creators in (and of) the digital age. Biotechnology, exotic medical research and especially neuroscience would be among the fascinating fields in which spectacular success awaited the dazzling minds with stunning skills in self-promotion and career advancement. Information technology in all its forms would provide exciting and, for some, well-paid work. The largest increases in employment, however, would be located in the low-income service sector, with fast food servers, teaching aides, nursing assistants and janitorial staff leading the way (Levin & Rumberger: 1983). Moreover, the new economy would not be welcoming to people interested in a steady careers and lifetime job security. Contract and part-time work would predominate as graduates were told to be entrepreneurial and to “own” their employment, since mutual loyalty between employer and employee would soon be laughably antique.

These rather bleak prospects, combined with the impending collapse of the North American manufacturing sector, the information technology investment bubble, the fragility of the deregulated financial markets, the downsizing of large public and private corporations and the outsourcing of much of the service sector to poorer parts of the continent and the world betokened yet another set of problems for education.

First to notice were “conservative” critics who complained that grade inflation and lower academic standards were allegedly infecting not just community colleges, but also second-tier and even elite universities. For some on the right, this signaled the failure of the educational system—often blamed on the progressive educational theories of John Dewey, teachers’ unions and the moral degeneracy of youth as a legacy of the 1960s counterculture of sex, drugs and rock-and-roll. What could not be blamed on immigrants, feminists and socialists was readily ascribable to permissiveness in education.

Conversely, from the left, it also appeared that educational innovation was to blame for flagging “standards,” but that postsecondary educational institutions were being cynically used as warehouses for young people whose understandable ambitions and high expectations needed to be “cooled out” prior to their release into an increasingly inhospitable job market. This function has long been recognized, but its importance has intensified as more and more young people have been enticed into higher education with promises of upward social mobility that simply could not be met (Clark, 1960).

Meanwhile, the tendency of postsecondary education to exchange critical education for narrowly vocational training and to precipitate the “overcredentializing” of society has larger economic implications. As Ira Shor has argued, “mass higher education is ... a unique device for handling the glut of unsellable goods and unemployable people. It ... is a creative response to the ineradicable problem of surplus under capitalism. It is an attractive instrument through which to mediate human and material surpluses ... Here we have the spectacle of an irrationally productive economy which can move ahead only by creating gigantic non-productive parasites on itself. The vast school system joins the defense budget and welfare as ironic monuments to American enterprise” (Shor, 1980: 5). Our problem is not too little education, as though adding certificate, diplomas and degrees were a magical way to produce prosperity for the individual and the community, but too much education of entirely the wrong kind. Still looming is the impending fiscal crisis of the state.

### **Educational Innovation and the Labour Process**

The enormous increase in postsecondary student enrolment over the past quarter-century has resulted in two extraordinary innovations—neither of which bode well for the provision of what is called “quality education.” The educational establishment, of course, is not much concerned with maintaining or improving educational quality. Quite the opposite, it is interested in maximizing educational quantity, a process that depends upon reducing the quality of mass education for students and, incidentally, deskilling teachers whose labour contributes to the increase in paper productivity in education. This development is known throughout the educational system as “dumbing down” the curriculum. It is necessary to ensure that large numbers of students successfully complete large numbers of courses and receive large numbers of documents attesting to their “mastery” of this or that piece of knowledge or practical skill, preferably without risking failure and especially without encountering critical theory, critical teachers and critical understanding of their own place and purpose within the educational industry.

Managing increasing enrolment is the first difficulty. Controlling the way learning is (or is not) achieved is the second. The organization of education mimics other industries. In the commercial language of contemporary schools, students enter as clients, teachers act as production-line workers and students emerge as products

equipped with demonstrable skills for rent or purchase by business and industry which are, of course, the next level of clients. The purpose here is not only to maximize productivity (the number of grades awarded divided by the number of hours taught, multiplied by the number of students in any given class), but to “model” the corporate employment structure for all the students to learn as if by osmosis, and all the teachers to experience as the essential condition of employment.

As Henry Ford taught us, one method for increasing productivity is to speed up the line. This can be done and is done by increasing class size and by reducing the classroom time allocated to specific courses either by reducing the number of classes per week or shortening the school year, or both. While demanding that the same amount of material be taught in a compressed time period is a transparent attack on the quality of education, the issue of large vs. small classes is less clear.

A robust debate has been underway for many years concerning class size. In the early to mid-1960s, when we, the authors, were taking our undergraduate degrees, there were some large introductory lectures that might involve a fully tenured professor speaking to an audience of about one hundred undergraduates. This group would then be broken up into tutorials and small seminars with a maximum size of fifteen or fewer. Today, it is not unusual to witness classes of over one thousand, often split into different rooms where the unlucky or merely tardy watch the proceedings on a remote screen or, perhaps later on streaming video. Tenured professors, moreover, are increasingly rare, especially in introductory or survey courses. Instead, contract, adjunct and sessional instructors combine with the normal cohort of graduate teaching assistants to do the bulk of university teaching. The same applies to junior or community colleges where part-time faculty commonly comprise the majority of the teaching staff (Wall, 2006, July 31). This institutional division of labour demonstrates the resourcefulness of financial officers and human resource departments. Not only do electronics permit the massive expansion of class size, but hiring people without having to pay benefits or to provide even a hint of employment stability is an accounting innovation for the ages. What is more, since contract educational workers live in perpetual fear of not being renewed and in perpetual (usually false) hope of eventually joining the full-time staff, they can be counted upon to raise no fuss, to lodge no complaints, and to toe the corporate ideological line without explicit threat or force.

This is not to say that many part-time or sessional faculty are anything but gifted and dedicated teachers. Many are, and are to be commended for their skill, enthusiasm and diligence. At the same time, an educational institution with a revolving-door hiring policy cannot (and may not want to) provide the continuity needed to create an academic community worthy of the name. However fiscally responsible, reliance upon people who are understandably timid and insecure in the practice of their profession does not lead to the best of

educational experiences.

### **Educational Innovation and “Dumbing Down” the Curriculum**

In addition to innovative employment practices, there has been an extraordinary shift in teaching methods occasioned by technological innovations. This is not entirely new. In the 1920s, Thomas Alva Edison confidently predicted that radio was the teaching tool of the future. In the 1940s, film was set to replace instructors. Television and videotape had their moments and, in the 1990s, Newt Gingrich expressed his fervent hope that computers would replace books in classrooms by the year 2000. Today, the Internet is being promoted both as an accessible if occasionally unreliable research device. Likewise, distance education—the use of long-range e-mail and Internet resources and chat rooms to simulate classroom experience—is the subject of incessant articles and corporate promotions advocating its use. Sometimes, as with private sector education businesses, the virtues of distance learning are listed as including the freedom to complete a degree part-time at the student's own pace while attending to family responsibilities maintaining a full-time job and the like. Sometimes, distance learning is advertised as bringing the possibility of education to inaccessible communities or to isolated individuals who are physically unavailable for normal classroom attendance through the effects of illness or injury, incarceration, employment in remote locations or deployment in military adventures. There can be no doubt that learning on-line makes some form of education accessible to those who might otherwise be denied the opportunity to learn in real classrooms, patronize real libraries and talk with real people in real time. Nevertheless, as computer wizard Clifford Stoll has said, distance learning is “an excellent way to get a third-rate education” (1999: 101).

Despite doubts about the efficacy of such methods of “curriculum delivery,” they form a core element in the belief systems of technological innovators because of their allegedly tremendous potential to boost profitability. Although students generally perceive on-line education to be less desirable than on-campus experience, and most prefer the opportunity to sit in a classroom and talk directly with teachers and other students, the promotion of education in the absence of bricks-and-mortar is unremitting. So, although the average American university graduates 55% of its initial enrolment, whereas the nation's largest for-profit postsecondary institution, the University of Phoenix, has a graduation rate of only 16%, and only 4% in its on-line courses (Costantini, 2007, 11 February), every effort is made to “virtualize” the educational assembly-line. This is especially distressing in light of the fact that this experiment in teaching and learning is perhaps the most heavily subsidized of all the for-profit postsecondary schools, accumulating almost two billion dollars annually in federal support.

Why the failure of on-line education for those who do not absolutely need it? Stoll (1999: 6) puts the matter simply: “Want a

nation of dolts? Just center the curriculum on technology—teach with videos, computers, and multimedia systems. Aim for highest possible scores on standardized tests. Push aside such less vocationally applicable subjects as music, art, and history. Dolts are what we'll get." While the educational value of alternative modes of instruction remains a hotly contested issue, one thing is monstrously clear: technological innovation has the potential to lower labour costs and the overhead expenses of "old-fashioned" facilities.

The enduring educational problem with technologically mediated education is that it is a prosthetic, a simulacrum for the mind. Arthur Kroker, Director of the Pacific Centre for Technology and Communications, has observed that the quality of machine-based learning is categorically inferior to education in "real life." The promises of technologically mediated education are largely and literally empty. "The will to technology," he writes, "equals the will to virtuality. And the will to virtuality is about the recline of western civilization: a great shutting down of experience, with a veneer of technological dynamism over an inner reality of inertia, exhaustion and disappearance (Kroker, 1993: 15)." Giving the lie to computer language, Kroker adds that "the computer has no memory, if by memory we mean political judgment and aesthetic reflection (Kroker, 1993: 35)." Digital communication provides no coherence, no chronology and no pattern to information. It can disseminate data useful to pass a test written with a number 2 pencil on machine-readable paper by a Scantron device. It does not do well with "essay-type" questions.

### **Educational Innovation and the Deskillling of Teachers**

As Harry Braverman (1974) famously reminded us, advanced industrial technology was instrumental in the deskilling of artisans from the introduction of steam-driven looms to the invention of computer-assisted design and manufacturing. What happened to weavers at the beginning of the nineteenth century was also happening to educators at the end of the twentieth. Educational technology needs technicians; education requires teachers.

Innovations that turn teaching into exercises in managing the machine-student "interface" reduce reliance on professorial expertise and discourage personal communication among student and teachers. They create a new educational paradigm based on the computerized monitoring of rote learning rather than the shared experience of refining ideas and acquiring insight. Implicit in the new paradigm is a growing trend toward disempowering faculty and reducing their autonomy by suggesting that their main function is to implement curriculum produced by "experts" in the upper strata of educational bureaucracies. Teaching becomes an matter of information exchange according to rubrics and templates generated by committees adept at creating lists of performance objectives in language ("action verbs") learned from the half-century career of Benjamin Bloom (Doughty, 2006). The vitality of informed discussion

is traded for the routine application of predetermined language embodying predigested thought. Such changes not only alter the conditions of teachers' work, but lead to a changing perception of their role within a social division of labour. That reduced role is intended to serve the political and economic goals of those who control schooling, rather than those directly engaged in teaching and learning. These changes effectively proletarianize faculty and reduce them to specialized technical facilitators. They are cheerfully marginalized as "guides on the side," rather than holding the much maligned position of a "sage on the stage."

In fact, in the best-case scenario for corporate education, teachers and classrooms can be jettisoned completely in favour of virtual methods of credentializing. Whether in the form of co-op education whereby students are farmed out to businesses as a form of unpaid labour or in the expansive strategies for prior learning assessment, alternatives to the academy are being readily accepted (cf. Barrett, Doughty & Meaghan, 1983). Indeed, a growing competition can flourish among schools when admissions departments vie for promising students by offering greater packages of "advanced standings" and off-campus credits. None of this is meant to undermine the prospects of students or to demean the programs of institutions which have legitimate, stable and mutually beneficial relationships with the industries which will eventually hire their graduates. Nurses who gain pre-graduation proficiency in hospital settings and engineers who spend a semester or more acquiring "hands-on" experience with reputable firms are probably better for the experience. Such arrangements can, however, be cynically abused—sometimes by the firms, sometimes by the educational institutions and sometimes by the students themselves.

Back in the classroom, the shift from curriculum-focused education to student-centred learning is partly premised on the myth that students act as rational consumers upon whose whims and proclivities curriculum is to be based. Despite a lack of exposure to (and experience of) the academic disciplines to which they are being introduced, many students—often equipped with an unearned sense of entitlement—appear to believe that a letter of acceptance from an educational institutions includes a right to determine what counts as success within an institution, and comes with a guarantee of graduation from an institution. Meantime, they do not generally appreciate that "independent learning" is a goal to be achieved, not an assumption to be made. Fearful of high attrition rates, however, many schools are reluctant to dampen naïve student expectations. In reality, as with shoppers in any department store or music shop, student choice is largely illusory, and is heavily manipulated by the corporate buyers whose choices actually define the parameters of the stock on the shelves. In such circumstances, teachers are more and more cast in the role of sales clerks, assuring customers that they were getting a good deal and helping them to try on new shoes or to select a popular CD from the "top 40" displays. If the charade is adequately performed by college employees, the shoppers exit the educational emporium

happy with their purchases, and none the wiser for the experience.

In the implementation of these new and discounted job descriptions, the nature and status of teachers' work is reformulated by restricting the forms of intellectual labour that are central to critical pedagogy. To reduce teaching to "information-in/information-out" processes implies that almost anyone can teach anything to anyone, and reduces education to mere operant conditioning, not dissimilar to the processing of pigeons in a Skinner-box. (cf. Barrett & Doughty, 1977a, 1977b). Such an approach undermines the role of teaching and the conditions of work necessary for teachers to serve as critical educational leaders. A rationale for this transformation is found in a number of managerial initiatives reminiscent of the Taylorized factory as knowledge is broken down into discrete parts, conceptualization is separated from implementation, standardize curricula, texts and course outlines bring teaching under the control of management through competency-based learning systems and quantified performance indicators.

Teachers are made accountable to administrators and those outside the college in the worlds of government, commerce and industry, all of which are far removed from daily classroom life (Rhoades & Slaughter:2006; Slaughter & Leslie:1997). Rather than knowledge and power being inextricably linked, and schooling representing an encounter with power relations, in the technologically decontextualized world of emerging top-down pedagogy, students exist independently of cultural issues and remain indifferent to the impact of political economy. There appears to be little room in the current educational practice for understanding how educational disparities reflect social class, gender and ethnicity (Ball: 2000). There is little room for insightful analysis of the way in which governmental authority, corporate control and technological framing of consciousness combine to separate students from their lives as putative citizens and potential performers in the public sphere, not merely as consumers indulging in the idiocy of private life. For all the claims to liberate students from the conventional canons of the past and from "antiquated" teaching methods, the current panoply of technical and organizational innovations unmistakably reveals its ideological foundations in the unfolding narrative of privatized market relations and their goal of generating a society in which students will become submissive citizens, uncomplaining workers and, above all, consummate consumers in a global culture that comes dangerously close to channeling nihilism.

### **Educational Innovation and Finance**

Fiscal "restraint," prompted by the chronic underfunding of education by the state, induces educational administrators to impose substandard but cost-effective methods on classroom teachers (Schuetze & Bruneau, 2004). It is not unknown for management to require PowerPoint presentations (cf. Tufte, 2006) to acclimatize



teachers and students to information technology games that are far less intellectually arduous than reading and discussing professional articles and books. It is not uncommon for administrators to impose multiple-choice examinations in order to reduce a teacher's formal workload and to compensate for that reduction by artfully adding more students to their classes. Such impositions of academic accounting techniques on the integrity of the classroom are ethically unconscionable. They undermine the academic freedom of teachers and employ their preferred methods of instruction and evaluation. They privilege seeking out sources of private sector funding over attending to academic responsibilities. Cozy relationships between corporate marketing and classroom activity come to be seen as necessary compromises and an acknowledgement of the reality of educational funding.

Corporate relations are important in other domains. Apart from branding buildings and programs, winning contracts with soft-drink dispensers and permitting strategically placed advertising in student washrooms, education officials are notoriously involved in stock market and real estate deals that offend many of the attentive public. A modest example brought forth a noteworthy reply in the case of an especially caustic *cri de coeur* in the *Toronto Star* by architectural columnist, Christopher Hume (2008, February 15).

Hume inveighed against the University of Toronto's decision to sell a once-prized facility to real estate developers. The David Dunlap Observatory, located just outside the city in the Town of Richmond Hill, was once used to scan the heavens, but is now deemed surplus to requirements, and is destined to provide land coveted for suburban sprawl, allowing university to pocket \$100 million in the bargain. Local residents and municipal politicians protested without effect. Mr. Hume therefore minced no words when he said that "the university has lost its way and betrayed its principles ... [and abandoned its] old ideals about excellence and the responsibilities that go with higher education." He implied that the university had come to ignore "the idea that education is more than ennobling and enriching, that it's what underlies civilization itself ... and that civilization isn't just something one studies, but a way of life." He insisted that the university is now just "part of a development process that any reasonably intelligent person knows is unsustainable and, therefore, intellectually suspect and morally indefensible, not to mention dumb." He regarded those who run the institution as "either fools or hypocrites, or both." He said that their decision is "coarse, venal and worldly in the worst sense of the word." Mr. Hume's sentiments were quite correct; but, of course, his ministrations failed to persuade the authorities.

Although not on a scale equal to the battles over Columbia University's land deals in Harlem or the University of California's actions at the "People's Park" some forty years ago, the pattern of questionable ethical decisions in the interest of attending to the "bottom line" continues. One problem with Hume's argument may have been its presumption that formal education ever unequivocally

held high moral standards in financial matters; however, even if a “golden age” of ethically defensible transactions could be identified, the inescapable conclusion today is that education is very much a business like any other. Funding is acquired from whatever sources may be found, investment is made in whatever markets may prove lucrative, and educational products are designed, promoted and sold in much the same manner as supermarkets and clothing stores plan and deliver the commodities that they advertise and supply to the consuming public—often with attractive “specials” and guarantees of fresh and fashionable merchandise. As one apologist for corporate funding put it: “In a fiscal environment where historical funding patterns are no longer available, colleges are positioning themselves to enter the highly competitive market place to compete for new business” (Evans, 1993, May/June). *Requiscat in pacem, academe.*

### **Corporations in the Classroom**

To ensure market stability and enhance profits for those who provide the products, major publishing firms have joined other corporate entities in insinuating themselves into educational systems. Friendly corporate “partnerships” make up an ever greater part of the design of curriculum by providing overworked teachers with ready-made packages that do all the necessary planning for them. Purveyors of glossy, four-colour “doorstops,” which is to say compulsory textbooks that often cost students in excess of \$100 each, regularly arrange for on-site book displays to hawk their wares. They sponsor “academic conferences” on teaching methods in much the same way that amazing vegetable peelers are demonstrated at county fairs and on late night television “infomercials.” As publishers become more heavily involved in the production of student study guides, test packages, accompanying CD-ROMs and other tricks of the trade, teachers assume less and less of the responsibility for course design. Deploying advanced computerized “teachware” to complement available computer “hardware” and “software”—is, of course, a project that is undertaken with content ideologically attuned to corporate interests.

This is especially so in the social sciences where economics texts promote the myth of consumer sovereignty, where sociology texts endorse the fluid concept of stratification in contrast to the conflictual notion of class, and where psychology texts do their best to individualize and thereby trivialize social and political dissent as the manifestation of deep psychological distress or, worse, mob hysteria when, that is, they take the time and space to discuss dissent at all. Most introductory texts are, of course, the product of scholars whose work must win the approval of internal marketing departments and—in the case of primary and secondary schools—politically sensitive bureaucracies. Accordingly, each company’s text is almost indistinguishable from its competitors, but much rides on which text wins the contract for large enrolment courses. In the United States, it is often pointed out that California and Texas pretty much determine what every other state will purchase in terms of K-12 learning

resources, and recent emotionally charged efforts to banish Darwin and even Thomas Jefferson from science and American history books augurs ill for the future. No matter which company prevails, however, this much is certain: the autonomy and academic freedom of the individual teacher and student will be compromised.

Occasionally, corporations take more direct steps to constrain the independence of academics. Especially in the health sciences, teachers are frequently encouraged to undertake private research contracts with, for instance, pharmaceutical companies. Publishing test results that call the safety of the drugs under investigation into question can have devastating results for an academic's career. In one astounding case at a prestigious university in New England, a professor of medicine had his clinic closed for revealing that a certain company had failed to maintain employee safety standards. Even athletic programs have had the largesse of sporting goods companies (which often provide "free" uniforms in exchange for advertising opportunities) withdrawn because of campus protest against the exploitation of "third-world" child labour in the manufacture of sporting equipment. The availability of corporate carrots goes hand-in-hand with the wielding of corporate sticks.

A chill is apparent in the academic ether, and the government-industry-education complex has much to account for regarding its own ethical conduct, particularly in the ways in which corporate influence in schooling has become an essential element in school financing. So What?

At this point, readers might be forgiven for asking why we have skipped lightly over very familiar turf. What is the point of reminding us that those who pay pipers and professors generally get to call the tunes? After all, academies have never been wholly isolated from external pressure and control. When Plato was dutifully scribbling down (or, perhaps, merely inventing) the "noble lies" that Socrates told in support of a tyrannical, metallurgically based social order, the partisanship was plain. When Europe's first universities were opened, the influence of the Church was all-encompassing. So, it is no surprise that both publicly and privately funded educational systems require that educational purposes fit within the interests and expectation of those who foot the bill.

Moreover, can we truly imagine that the contemporary relationship between learning and political economy is equally repressive, much less more oppressive than in ancient, medieval or early modern times? Today, at least in advanced industrial societies, gender, race and class differences in access to education have been largely eliminated in theory, if not always in practice. The banishment of religious and ethnic minorities is almost never officially permitted. And, even if some people continue to encounter discrimination, the levels and intensity of exclusion are lower than in the very recent past. Human rights is now high on most political agendas, and the "quota" systems that used to limit the number of Jews in higher education

have been replaced by recuperative rules that compel colleges and universities to set aside a minimum number of places for people of, for example Native or African-American ancestry. Affirmative action has displaced bigoted discrimination in the interest of addressing equity and pluralism. We have not created a perfect world, but surely educational reform has made a better one than was apparent a half-century, to say nothing of centuries ago.

As well, it can be argued, the proliferation of departments dedicated to Women's, Black, Native or Postcolonial Studies negates the notion that misogynists and racists dominate the intellectual landscape. Clearly, the current upsurge in Environmental Studies programs modifies the charge of corporate ecological malfeasance. Even in these times of capitalist triumphalism, postsecondary sociology departments are frequently welcoming to radicals and superannuated Marxists. Perhaps most impressively, corporate self-criticism and assumption of responsibility is plain in the expansion of ethics courses in business school curricula.

If critical theory does not gain easy entry into institutional boardrooms, there is nothing new about that either. Instead of worrying about the alleged corporate takeover of the academy, skeptics may argue that academic critics, quasi-revolutionaries, avant-garde culturalists and assorted free spirits should be grateful that they generally have protection to pursue their arcane ideals and promote whatever countercultural alternatives they see fit. Except in the reddest of the American red states, there are few who seriously object to teaching evolution in schools and colleges, and there are ample instances of academic enclaves where postmodern studies are all the rage. These instances cannot entirely be passed off as a pedagogical application of Herbert Marcuse's concept of "repressive tolerance."

In the alternative, so the argument runs, liberal educators should now more fully understand the importance of the old saw: "Be careful what you wish for." At the outset of modernity, after all, John Milton's *Areopagitica* and, at the full flowering of the Enlightenment's ambitions, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* sang the praises of free speech and expressed confidence that the truth will out when all ideas have equal access to the "marketplace of ideas." That market, it can be said, is now wide open and, if consumer choice runs to narrowly vocational education, such is the judgment of the people. If the humanities are shunned, such is evidence of English, History and Philosophy Departments' failure to attract not only the best and the brightest, but even the mediocre and dull. Moreover, if labour relations and teacher-student relationships model the morals and mores of the corporate sector, what better education could young people receive than an early and comparatively tame exposure to the way of life in the real world?

### **An Alternative View of Innovation**

It would be folly to presume that any efforts to resist the

juggernaut of technologically enhanced global capitalism are likely to have spectacular results in terms of slowing down, much less stopping or reversing, the Zeitgeist in its current form. For most conscientious and caring teachers, the best hope might be for an instant of clarity. Like Sisyphus, in Camus' rendering of the ancient Greek myth (1955), they may acquire a moment of lucidity at precisely the time when the futility of their labour is most clear. Such an epiphany might not be much, but it would be something; perhaps it is everything to which we may confidently aspire.

For the more adventuresome, undertaking a pedagogy of resistance to the seemingly ineluctable forces and pressures that surround us may provide an opportunity to contemplate accomplishing more. To raise our sites a little necessitates no delving into anarchist rants or Marxian screeds. We need not become aficionados of Ivan Illich (1970) or Paulo Friere (1972). All that is minimally required is a glance back to the higher hopes of the Enlightenment. We need only recall the optimism of those who sought an arithmetic alleviation of misery and a modest qualitative improvement in social life, and who promoted the idea that education could contribute both to personal development and to social justice. No more than a passing familiarity with the likes of John Dewey is needed to see how much the ideal of education has been sacrificed to Mammon.

Dewey (1916) advocated an education that was rooted in a broad-based democratic ethos which included, but also went well beyond, the provision of vocational skills. Dewey's underlying goal was to stimulate active and informed citizenship. This is not a goal that we should ignore, no matter how much it has been displaced by the consumer culture enveloping us. It is in the interest of corporate education to replace the public with the private, both in terms of the ownership and control of the means of production, and in terms of the preoccupations of individuals who are encouraged to think of themselves not as citizens, but as customers. It is in our interest and the interest of our society to restore some of that public discourse and public space (Kariel, 1989).

Dewey did not disdain individualism. He believed the aim of education was to assist the student to make connections between formal knowledge and the enduring structures and changing appearances of the social environment. The purpose was to enhance the students' capacity to shape their experience and control their social destiny, not merely to advance career objectives and satisfy immediate material desires. He called for a unity of theory and practice to integrate understanding and action, and to empower those historically excluded from educational opportunities. That capacity to shape, control and empower depends on our willingness to take exception to acultural, ahistorical and apolitical education. It consists of resisting such innovations as the removal of all talk of work and the economy from the liberal arts curriculum of colleges (as the province of Ontario has done) in order to enhance training in marketable competencies while sabotaging efforts to understand the nature of

that work and the structure of that economy. No initiative better illustrates what is wrong with contemporary education than that.

### Back to the Future

To gain needed perspective, it is useful to abandon the view from within the specious present and to see our situation in relation to others that have preceded us. Educators might thus be drawn to the contemplation of the intellectual centre of the ancient world. Our understanding of the flowering of the arts and letters in fifth-century Athens may be only slightly less inflated than our perception of the origin of democratic traditions in the Athenian polis at its most glorious.

The secular mythology of the day ought not, of course, to be uncritically accepted, just as we ought not to accept dominant ideologies today. While not brushing aside the rhetoric of its greatest politicians, we would do well to reflect on how much Socrates despised democracy, and we need to recognize that, at its pinnacle as a model for modern politics, only about 5% of Athenians had the right to vote (roughly the same percentage as Americans in the sixty years after their revolution in 1776, or of Britons after the passage of the Great Reform Bill of 1832). Athenian democracy was certainly not all that it was cracked up to be. Nonetheless, we can salvage something of value by attending to the Athenian ideal of the citizenship and citizenship education. It involved, according to Henry A. Giroux (1983: 168) a model of rationality ... that is explicitly political, normative, and visionary." Giroux goes on at length:

Within this model, education was seen as intrinsically political, designed to educate the citizen for intelligent and active participation in the civic community. Moreover, intelligence was viewed as an extension of ethics, a manifestation and demonstration of the doctrine of the good and just life. Thus, in this perspective, education was not meant to train. Its purpose was to cultivate the formation of virtuous character in the ongoing quest for freedom. Therefore, freedom was always something to be created, and the dynamic that informed the relationship between the individual and the society was based on the continuing struggle for a more decent and just political community.

Athens, for all its high-flown rhetoric, was a slave state, as was Thomas Jefferson's rebellious republic. Aristotle, its foremost empirical philosopher, frankly stated that the ideal of freedom was reserved only for the wealthy, who had the leisure time to engage in the pursuits of art, science and politics. With this in mind, we can permit ourselves at least a small measure of self-congratulation. We have learned something in the past twenty-five hundred years. For a short time, we even embraced the idea that human beings, in Aristotle's own phrase, are *zoon politikon*—political animals—and that

we could and should be self-governing . Our reluctance to put that normative possibility fully into practice owes its explanation to political economy, but the ideal somehow remains.

In the pursuit of the reasons for our failure to achieve the ideal, we must delve more deeply into the domain of power. Only by doing so can we save our best instincts from further betrayal. So, although some mention of Marx is not required, a passing reference to one of his twentieth-century followers would not go amiss in offering a diagnosis and presenting a therapy for our educational pathologies. To help chart a course for authentic, life-affirming education as we descend into the twentieth-first century, we might usefully bring up the example of an exemplary educator from the twentieth. The person we have in mind is Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937).

Gramsci, of course, is mainly remembered for his musings on politics (a subject that most of his comrades notoriously got wrong), and for his introduction of the concept of “hegemony” into the twentieth-century political lexicon. What may strike some as odd, however, is the fact that this early leader of Italy’s Communist Party presented an eloquent argument in support of traditional education. Unlike Aristotle, though, he insisted that it be made available not only to the elite, but to the middle and working classes as well.

Aristotle thought that freedom to engage in politics was properly reserved for the leisured class; Gramsci imagined that freedom to engage in politics was the means to provide more leisure and more creative freedom for the working class. This, of course, could be made possible by the wise application of precisely the same technology that is now used to increase productivity while simultaneously undercutting the income of the producers (workers’ efficiency is going up; workers’ compensation is going down).

Writing in *Avanti* in December 1917, Gramsci argued that the “proletariat needs a free school ... not a school of slavery and mechanization... Professional schools must not become incubators of little monsters, who are aridly educated for a job, without general ideas and general culture, without spirit and with only a sharp eye and a strong hand” (Quoted in Welton, 1980: 1). Education should be emancipatory, not merely a means for people to become complicit in their own oppression.

Education primarily based on job skills allows the ruling class to manufacture conformity and consent among the masses. For Gramsci, any successful challenge to the ruling class’s power and values required the working classes to become consciously aware of their own history, culture and politics and this, he argued, requires knowledge of traditional culture, history and politics and their role in dominating the masses. The danger of fascism in Italy was its introduction of vocational training under the rhetoric of “child-centred progressivism” for the working classes. This type of education would remove the historical memory of the working class. Even though

couched in conservative values, the traditional Italian school system, through an emphasis on history, literature and language, encouraged disciplined study and critical analysis. Observed Gramsci: "Fascists found their allies in the schoolmasters who encouraged spontaneity and autodidacticism and not in those who functioned as agents of cultural transmission by requiring students to learn the 'facts' of history, geography or science".

For Gramsci, a disciplined study of history, culture and politics was necessary for the struggle of workers against capitalism, and schooling is hard work requiring concentration, self-control and unflagging persistence. The facile vocationalizing of education for the masses reinforced the inequalities of the social class system. In the alternative, Gramsci argued that the comprehensive education of the ruling classes be extended to children of the proletariat because academic work was relevant to understanding the real world of capitalist economic, political and cultural exploitation. For Gramsci, child-centred vocational training was easily compatible with ruling class control and economic and cultural exploitation of the proletariat by the fascists (Gramsci, 1971:24-43).

We are no longer (we reassure ourselves) threatened by fascism as it was understood in early twentieth-century Italy or later in Spain (cf. Gross, 1980). We do, however, experience seemingly permanent structural inequalities and inequities that are characterized by increasing gaps in wealth, power and knowledge between the elites and the working and poorer classes, with the middle class being increasingly squeezed in between. It is therefore no wonder that comprehensive schooling systems containing technological, pedagogical and ideological innovations are helping to solidify contemporary patterns of economic, social and political control.

Furthermore, the tightening of social control is sometimes excused because of perceived and well-acknowledged dangers. Everyone claims to understand that we are in some sort of crisis. We are certainly in a global economic recession. We are said to be on the brink of an environmental catastrophe. It is equally apparent that we are experiencing an energy emergency. We worry about a declining standard of living. We are witness to chronic international instability. Some predict pandemics. Some even imagine that we are in a deep moral or spiritual crisis. Yet, at the same time as we are becoming sensitive to the perils around us, we are unwilling to renovate education and reintroduce some of our society's most fundamental, generous and optimistic ideas and ideals. We continue to accept the prescriptions and proscriptions advanced by the "leaders" who have produced and who continue to profit from many of the hazards that threaten us. It is surely a good time to awaken and to take the delightful words of John Maynard Keynes (1951: 134-135) to heart: "There is no reason why we should not feel ourselves free to be bold ...to try the possibilities of things. And over against us, standing in the path, there is nothing but a few old gentlemen tightly buttoned up in their frock coats, who only need to be treated with a little friendly



disrespect and bowled over like ninepins” (Keynes, 1963, pp. 134-135).

The best definition of insanity, it has been said (some say by Ben Franklin; some say by Albert Einstein) is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. By these lights, our educational system may not be underachieving or broken; it might quite literally be insane. By “the same thing,” we mean following the same path of technical innovation, organizational concentration, curriculum commodification, ideological consumerism and pedagogical vocationalism in the absence of an authentic opportunity for critical reflection on the power relations that influence our thoughts and actions. Change that simply enhances the structure of power in the classroom, expedited ideological reproduction and increases the job-worthiness of college graduates is intensification, not innovation. Those relations are best explored in the several dimensions of our political economy and the critical analysis of the way in which they shape our educational practices.

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