

# Dystopian Social Theory and Education

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DOI:

[10.1111/edth.12112](https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12112)

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*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Warmington, P 2015, 'Dystopian Social Theory and Education', *Educational Theory*, vol. 65, no. 3, pp. 265-281. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12112>

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Checked July 2015

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## **DYSTOPIAN SOCIAL THEORY AND EDUCATION**

**Paul Warmington, University of Birmingham, UK.**

### **Introduction**

The university at which I teach is four miles from where Paul Willis researched his classic study *Learning to Labour*<sup>1</sup>. Willis' book was a high watermark of mid-70s Marxist educational theory. Subtitled 'How working class kids get working jobs', it theorized the cultural processes through which schooling reproduces a consenting labour force. It did so through a critical ethnography of a group of white, working-class lads in England's industrial West Midlands. Their subculture – masculine, rebellious and disdainful of what they saw as irrelevant academic education - equipped them for their futures on the shop floor. At the end of their schooling they followed their fathers into factory life, trading rebellion for exploitation.

My elite university and its students are distant socially and historically from Willis' lads. Few of my undergraduates are familiar with Willis' work, which alongside Althusser<sup>2</sup>, Bowles and Gintis<sup>3</sup> and Madan Sarup<sup>4</sup> helped to map Marxist educational theory (to these works I would add also, in the British context, writing by Farrukh Dhondy, Barbara Beese and Leila Hassan in the black Marxist journal *Race Today*<sup>5</sup>). Marxist theories of correspondence have long fallen out of favour in education departments, and education as a field of study is unfashionable in sociology departments.

Today the influence of neo-Marxist structural theory on the sociology of education might best be described as live but intermittent. The reasons for this are myriad but there can be little doubt that our understanding of education *in capitalism* has weakened. Recent books by Pauline Lipman<sup>6</sup>, John Marsh<sup>7</sup> and David Blacker<sup>8</sup> have been put forward as evidence of a resurgence of neo-Marxist and structural accounts of schooling. Maybe so, but what these texts certainly share is a political commitment to the sociology *of* education (wherein education is critically examined as a political site, as an ideological and regulatory power), rather than sociology *for* education (atrophyed sociology that aims to furnish policy-makers with information to enable a tighter fit between students and the existing system). Criticality, in the writing of Lipman, Marsh and Blacker, lies in their rejection of educational business as usual: refusal of the glass beads of 'choice' and 'opportunity'. Instead their focus is on

schooling as a system constituted by the specific social universe of capital: a social universe whose substance is not social justice, intellectual endeavour or self-realization but *value*.

These three authors return neo-Marxist structural theory to us in chastened form, acknowledging some of the lessons of cultural studies, feminism and critical theories of race. They avoid Marxist triumphalism but are unafraid to suggest that correspondence, determinism and pessimism may again need to enter our theoretical worldviews. This is most explicit in Blacker's analysis: his reminder that education in capitalism cannot really be other than an agent of capitalist social and cultural reproduction. It cannot subvert or liberate in the sense that critical pedagogues hope and it cannot lessen inequalities in the way that social democrats insist. Education, in short, is not a panacea for the system of exchange and exploitation that produced it. Once we have taken on board that hard fact, they suggest, maybe, just maybe, we can act in the cause of democratic change.

With a certain gallows humour, I shall refer to their approach as *dystopian* social theory. Their analyses are dystopian in that they all carry a sense that the twenty-first century will not right itself; that current austerity policies are not a blip but a symptom of an irreversible economic and environmental malaise – or, to be less coy, they are an aggressive defence of super-capitalism in a time of turmoil. They are also (Blacker and Marsh, in particular) unfashionably sceptical of the rhetoric of educational empowerment, insofar as it fails to address our very real *disempowerment*. Dictionary definitions of dystopia refer to imagined societies in which people are afraid: worlds maintained by corporate, bureaucratic control; worlds in which people live dehumanized lives; worlds characterized by oppression, squalor and environmental degradation. Blacker, Marsh and Lipman, however, do not offer fictional imaginings of dystopia but depictions spun from the sociological imagination.

### **Education in terminal capitalism**

So what distinguishes these dystopians from Willis or Bowles and Gintis? It is the economy, dummy – but it is also history. Between the mid-1970s and the present, 'western' schooling has been reshaped: by globalization and technology; mass structural unemployment; the decline of heavy industry, the rise of financial casinos, the rhetoric and realities of neo-liberalism. Marsh, Lipman and, particularly, Blacker are all adamant that there is now no direction home; late capitalism, dependent on constant growth, fierce exploitation of natural

resources and increasingly monstrous hybridizations of private corporations and state subsidy, is unsustainable. Blacker begins by anticipating the endgame:

The collapse may be concentrated and acute or drawn out and “stepwise” or, in the happiest (and most unlikely) case, gradual and smooth. All we can do now is, like Marx after his own fashion, brace for the historical inevitability and do what we can by way of preparation. As capitalism has gone so far as to implicate the entire planet, this fatalism – dour or cheerful – is the only real “environmentalism” and the only true educational endeavour available.<sup>9</sup>

For Blacker, late capitalism is, in a very literal sense, in terminal decline. And what terminal capitalism means for education is this. If the social relations of capitalism in its earlier forms were constituted by exchange, domination and exploitation, in terminal capitalism a whole lot fewer people will be required for exploitation. For those declared surplus to capitalism’s main business – the poor, the black, the disabled, the geographically unlucky – anything more than minimal education may become unnecessary for the state and the private sector (unless it is the kind of education that can be squeezed by capitalists for whatever spare change it might provide). The much vaunted ‘learning’ or ‘knowledge’ society that the twenty-first century was supposed to herald<sup>10</sup> is already devolving, for many, into a story of disinvestment, poor education in preparation for poor (or no) work, and the recasting of schools as holding pens (can it really be coincidence that in recent years I have come across scholars divided by age, experience and geography, who have developed convincing analyses of working-class schooling as preparation for prison life?).<sup>11</sup>

If we take Blacker at his word, then the key word is *eliminationism*. His dystopian claim is that the growing global underclass (for want of a better term) will, in the immediate future, be eliminated from the equation of proper education and work. Indeed the whole equation of work for employment, security and modest social mobility will itself be eliminated, seen through the rear mirror as the quaint remnant of social democracy. If, by the way, Blacker seems too pessimistic, too much the Jeremiah, we should note that Lipman and Marsh also envisage a future of disinvestment and hollowed out communities. The theoretical implication of a terminal capitalism that produces an expanding underclass, rather than a disciplined labour force, is that ‘classical’ Marxist theories of education as a site of social reproduction need to be rethought. It is this historical and theoretical shift that distinguishes

the current neo-Marxists from their precursors. To paraphrase British political satire *The Thick of It*, what should sociologists of education do now it's all gone a bit JG Ballard?

### **Social theory and education**

Since Marx and Engels paid little attention to formal education in their writing, Marxists have been reliant on 'translating'<sup>12</sup> what they take to be Marx's method into the field of education. This necessarily implies beginning with an understanding of a social universe predicated upon value: that is, production and exchange, exploitation and domination. Althusser has been credited with initiating the flow of Marxist educational theory that emerged in the 1970s<sup>13</sup>. Althusser understood education to be the dominant *ideological state apparatus* in capitalist social formations, the salient agent of cultural and economic reproduction. Althusser did not, of course, suggest that the content and structures of schooling were controlled and imposed on the populace in a simple sense; recruitment and consent are central to the educational project.<sup>14</sup> Yet schooling is shot through with repression and domination; it is, after all, the only social opportunity that is compulsory.

The central concern of those who followed Althusser was social reproduction. As a form of critical social theory, Marxist educational theory was founded upon presuppositions similar to those outlined in Morrow and Torres.<sup>15</sup> Firstly, society is understood as a complex totality, in which specialized educational institutions play an important role. Secondly, educational institutions are significant both in stabilizing society and creating possibilities for its alteration. So the interplay between educational institutions and wider society become a necessary object of sociological scrutiny. In capitalism that interplay is necessarily directed, local resistance notwithstanding, towards sustaining the creation of value by enabling continued, reasonably stable exploitation of alienated labour. For Madan Sarup, alienation was the key to understanding schooling in Marxist terms. 'As an expression of alienated production' Sarup argued, education 'has become fetishized ...reified ... seen as a power over and above man, and therefore beyond change.'<sup>16</sup> Fetishized education was 'dehumaniz(ing)', 'anti-educational', 'anti-social'<sup>17</sup>; it repressed truly critical thinking and action.

### **Correspondence theory: how working-class kids got working-class jobs**

The pivotal moment in 1970s Marxist educational theory's development was arguably the publication of Samuel Bowles and Herb Gintis' *Schooling in Capitalist America*<sup>18</sup>. Their

correspondence theory argued that the social relations of the education system were designed to anticipate those of capitalism's systems of production. As such, schooling was both a technical and a social process; it legitimated inequality, inuring pupils to the dynamics of domination, self-regulation and reward that would be replicated in their working lives (including 'proper' identifications with stratifications of social class, race and gender). Despite an increased rhetoric of equality of opportunity, what schooling did not do was 'promote economic equality and positive human development'<sup>19</sup>. In order to work towards a hopeful future, one in which schools would promote democratization, participatory politics and critical education, the current structure of schooling had to be viewed with pessimism, as being beyond mere reform and in need of revolution.

Paul Willis offered a kind of inversion of Bowles and Gintis' correspondence theory. If schooling disciplined pupils for their future place in the labour process, he asked, how did one explain the lives of those who disregarded its middle-class cultural forms? Working in the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, then helmed by Stuart Hall, Willis' interest was in capitalism's cultural penetration of classes and individuals:

Class identity is not truly reproduced ...until it has been recreated in the context of what appears to be personal and collective volition. The point at which people live, not borrow, their class destiny is when what is given is reformed, strengthened and applied to new purposes.<sup>20</sup>

Willis' lads' rebellion worked in two ways. Firstly, their sense of being a white, male, straight working-class 'us', in opposition to a middle-class, submissive, emasculated 'them' confirmed their sense of knowing how the 'real' world of work and adulthood operated. This rationalized their partial rejection of formal schooling's relations and symbols. Without symbolic qualifications they were fitted only for the manual labour that was, in any case, their gold-standard of adult masculinity. Secondly, their rebellion was confined to the specifics of their own lives, with no links made to wider expressions of resistance. They were conformist rebels, in that they believed their own antagonistic behaviour was an exception to rules that should hold for society in general. In Willis' analysis a complex cultural mediation was present ('What is certain is that ...ideology is not uncritically transmitted downwards until those at the bottom in some way receive and have and are nothing'<sup>21</sup>) and yet in the end 'social reproduction is decisively sealed.'<sup>22</sup>

## **Beyond learning to labour**

In *Learning to Labour* Willis described working-class transitions from school to heavy industry in the mid-1970s. If he had written the book in the 1950s it might not have looked much different but *Learning to Labour* could not have been written twenty years later, still less today. For one thing, the capitalist structures that Willis' depicted appeared to turn his working class lads out into fairly secure employment. Today secure employment is a fate which cannot be promised even to middle-class graduates, let alone their working-class contemporaries. As corporations protect fragile profit, the labour scrapheap grows ever taller:

...as British economist Joan Robinson once remarked, "the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all." In retrospect it may look as if we never had it so good as back when they were exploiting us ...we may retrospectively comprehend that the only thing worse than undergoing exploitation via schooling is *not* finding a way to undergo it.<sup>23</sup>

Young Britons were to find this out within a few years of the publication in *Learning to Labour*. By the late 1970s the full impacts of the 1973-4 oil crises had begun to bite. Then came the Thatcher government. By the early 1980s unemployed workers were marching in protest under 'Right to Work' banners. They were, in Blacker's terms, marching for the right for their labour to be exploited, in fear of not being exploited at all.

But, in fact, even as Willis' was researching, fractions of Britain's young *black* working class were already being labelled surplus to capitalism's requirements. First among these were the under-employed children of post-World War Two Caribbean immigrants in the inner-cities, a group invisible in Willis' study, except as objects of white working-class lads' antagonism. It was left to Black British intellectuals, such as Farrukh Dhondy and Ambalavaner Sivanandan to address theoretical silences around race, empire and migrant labour.<sup>24</sup> As many young blacks found themselves in conflict with their schools, Dhondy, Beese and Hassan wrote that the upper end of the secondary school system, in particular, seemed less a place of education and more a holding container for adolescents who were becoming 'fully fledged independent members of the unruly section of the working class at the bottom of the British ladder of labour.'<sup>25</sup> Dhondy *et al's* was a partial view, a summoning of what they imagined to be a

potentially radical underclass. However, their analysis was prescient as regards social exclusion, racial inequalities and the mythic promise of social mobility.

One of the flaws in British Marxism of the 1970s and 1980s was its failure to draw fully upon the analyses of those who observed the educational experiences of the children of post-war black migrants, experiences that foreshadowed terminal capitalism's wastage. In particular, what commentators such as Sivanandan<sup>26</sup> grasped was that black youth's shift from school to unemployment could not be understood as entry into a reserve army of labour; large sections of the young black school-leavers of the 1970s were simply set to become disposable. And, of course, among sections of the British right, who still dreamt of 'repatriating' black communities, there was the idea that black people could eventually be eliminated from society. Sivanandan's impatience with standard theories of social reproduction prefigures Blacker and Marsh:

Nowhere have the youth, black and white, identified their problems with unemployment alone. That has been left to the social analysts of a past age. The youth know, viscerally, that there will be no work for them, ever, no call for their labour... Society (is) changing... They are not the unemployed, but the never employed.<sup>27</sup>

There is a profound distinction between the reserve army of labour thesis, through which theorists of social reproduction have understood poor work and unemployment, and the world of a permanent, terminal underclass that Blacker and Marsh depict. However, the 'break' with earlier Marxist educational theory that Blacker and Marsh's writing signifies has antecedents, not least in these black British Marxist accounts. This is unsurprising. Insofar as class operates through categories of race, gender and disability, the lived experience of terminal capitalism has been experienced unevenly and at different rates. Lipman, Marsh and Blacker all offer some recognition of the ways in which Black, Latino and disabled communities have been advance parties in the march to social disposability (redressing the relative neglect of race apparent in Willis, and in Bowles and Gintis). They point also to the ways in which the pathologization of welfare recipients, single parent families and liberal permissiveness has served ideologically to ensure the domination and regulation of those who may have been insufficiently disciplined through the routines of school and work.

### **The learning society**



These new thinkers are also distanced from 1970s Marxist educational theory by a phenomenon that was unborn when Willis and Bowles and Gintis produced their seminal accounts: the growth of the ideological fantasy of education as the great enabler of social mobility and equality – education as a social panacea. In both Britain and the USA this has been promoted through the utopian rhetoric of a ‘learning society’, that conflicted response to neo-liberalism’s penetration of education and culture. In the settlement championed by governments from the late 1970s onwards, it was held that social mobility would be available to those who actively participated in the learning game (as opposed to those semi-citizens who ‘chose’ to subsist on the fringes of shrinking welfare provision). In the putative learning society citizens would take advantage of continual (and continuous) opportunities for lifelong learning, up-skilling and professional development. Thus the new learner-workers would be governed into the kind of happy flexibility suited to neo-liberal capitalism.

There is now a canon of critical writing on neo-liberalism’s shaping of education and social policy.<sup>28</sup> Marsh, Lipman and Blacker all take it as read that contemporary education policy is embedded in ‘...the increasing colonisation of education policy by economic policy imperatives.’<sup>29</sup> In tracing the ‘learning society’s’ peculiar conflation of education and economics, it may be illuminating to discuss briefly the British context, in which, during the 1980 and 90s, I taught and developed adult return-to-learn programmes akin to those that Marsh describes in his autobiographical preface to *Class Dismissed*.<sup>30</sup>

What is notable about British education since the late 1970s, and its hegemonic championing of education as the route to social inclusion and mobility, is the symbiosis that has emerged between (neo-liberal) economic and (liberal) social justice claims. The central premise of this orthodoxy is that ‘economic development necessarily follows from educational investment.’<sup>31</sup> Its instigation as a policy project precedes the formal arrival of New Right neo-liberalism. It was, in fact, the iconic ‘Great Debate’ speech delivered in 1976 at Oxford University by nominally socialist Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan that set the precedent for the fetishization of education and the pathologization of educational failure - individual and collective - that has remained emblematic in social policy since the world economic crises of the mid-1970s. In the absence of clear strategies in other areas of government policy, Callaghan chose to blame schools and colleges for offering inadequate preparation for the world of work and to blame the young unemployed themselves for being ill-equipped for a

labour market in transformation. The Callaghan government also heralded a shift to the post-Keynesian position rapidly gaining currency in the wake of global recession. This post-Keynesianism implicitly held that permanent structural unemployment would have to become a feature of economies wishing to exercise tight control of inflation.

However, hegemonic settlements cannot be preserved solely through blame; they must also be cemented through commonsense, cheer-leading, encouragement and reward. The promotion of the 'learning society' in Britain, with its zenith in the 1990s and 2000s, was couched in a language that married notions of social justice to the drive for economic expansion. For those in politics and education sector who had long fought for greater educational opportunities for under-represented groups, the expansion of qualification pathways, higher education places and training programs seemed to offer spaces for action. We became committed to 'access' and to 'widening participation' in education.

Yet alongside this there persisted another language: one that depicted the threat to social and economic cohesion posed by an undisciplined underclass whose lives did not correspond to the new economy:

...we estimate that the UK economy could benefit to the tune of £8bn per annum if our schools significantly increased their attention to employability. Social costs of crime or other outcomes of idleness amongst a proportion of the young unemployed, plus the ensuing costs of policing and the judicial process, have not been included and would add even more to this figure.<sup>32</sup>

These discursive constructions - of the learning society and the underclass – are tightly aligned. After all, if government has become the provider of opportunity, then what excuse is there for failure? Those who remain poor and under-qualified must simply have refused to grasp educational opportunity. They must, therefore, be held responsible for their own failure. 'Non-participation' in formal education became equated with a kind of sub-citizenship.

In Britain theorists have explained how across the 1980s and 90s the equation of education (in particular, high levels of participation in further and higher education) with national economic well-being ossified into an article of faith. For Gleeson, the rhetoric of the learning society was characterized by an 'abandonment of pretense that education and training is

anything more than the servant of industrial, business and economic interests.’<sup>33</sup> For Ainley and Bailey, it was an ‘unsubstantiated argument’<sup>34</sup> and the economic orthodoxy that spawned subsequent generations of education policy was no more than a statement of faith that elevated ‘the importance of education and training policies out of all proportion to their real place in the economy.’<sup>35</sup>

### **Why we cannot teach our way out...**

The three new books I want to discuss in detail offer structural analyses of education in (terminal) capitalism. Each traces the historical routes by which education became misrecognised as a driver of economic security and social equality, and each explores the exhaustion of that comfort narrative. John Marsh’s *Class Dismissed: why we cannot teach our way out of inequality*<sup>36</sup> is, in part, a restatement of Ainley’s warning about the inflation of the economic role of education and training. Marsh’s central argument is that levels of educational attainment across national populations play only a minimal role in either reducing or increasing inequality. His analysis of US education and economy is influenced, in part, by Wilkinson and Pickett’s landmark *The Spirit Level: why more equal societies almost always do better*<sup>37</sup>, which reasserted the argument that socio-economic inequalities within nations are at the root of social disintegration and the wastage of life chances.

In the first half of *Class Dismissed*, Marsh uses international statistical comparisons of investment in education and measures of socio-inequality to dismiss claims that late capitalism has been characterised by across the board shifts to high skills-high trust working. Marsh’s analysis restates the awkward truth that worms its way through the ‘meritocracy’s’ fascination with its own success – and the terms of its success.’<sup>38</sup> Those who have benefitted from the education system and now find themselves in good fortune tend to believe that ‘what worked for them (a college education) must work for others, including and perhaps especially the poor.’<sup>39</sup> The fact is, however, that not everyone can learn their way out of poverty because, as Marsh’s figures show, late capitalism still operates a very large low wage economy. The economic system that makes some affluent is the same system that locks others into poor work:

The question we should be asking, therefore, is not how much education can or will affect inequality – the answer is not overly much and it comes with no guarantees of

its effects – but how some countries achieved lower measures of inequality to begin with. That is how you reduce inequality.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, for Marsh inequality is an economic and political problem, not an educational one *per se*, and if we are serious about redressing inequalities then we must refocus our efforts on the economic-political sphere. Consequently, Marsh urges a ‘new modesty regarding education’<sup>41</sup>, not only among neo-liberal advocates of the knowledge economy whose claims that higher levels of education, training and credentialization will, in and of themselves, grow the economy and provide new opportunities for the poor, but also among educators whose passion for social justice has led to an indiscriminating faith in the value and virtue of education as the means to social well-being.

No matter how noble the efforts of educators may be, says Marsh, the classroom is not where it’s at. For particular individuals educational experiences and attainment are life-changing, and that is not to be sneered at. However, the educational drives of the past thirty years – the access movements, the promises of the learning society - have not changed the fact that inequality begets inequality. The effects of economic and cultural capital are simply too weighty. As Marsh reminds us, the most common intergenerational experiences are, at one end of society, to be born poor and remain poor, and, at the other end, to be born affluent and remain affluent. So coming from a financially secure background is far more likely to lead a child to high educational attainment than educational attainment is likely to lead to financial security for a poor child – which leads to the dystopian conclusion that ‘there may be no such thing as equality of opportunity.’<sup>42</sup>

Marsh also traces the routes by which, in the USA, education assumed its inflated place in economic and social policy. While there has always been interplay between education and work, the American educational mission of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was a diverse one; it did not reduce the value of education to its perceived economic function. Those who strove in the cause of social justice saw in education the potential for mass social change. This was not necessarily a mistaken belief; during parts of the twentieth century education did enable social and political mobility for substantial sections of the American population. Marsh points out, for instance, that the two opposed colossi of early twentieth century African-American politics, Booker T Washington and WEB Dubois, both conceived of education as the great up-lifter of the race, albeit in strikingly different ways. Marsh does

somewhat overlap the implication that Dubois over-conflated education as a route to political liberation with education as a route to economic power. If we read *The Education of Black People*, it is apparent that for Dubois, the two purposes of ‘black’ education were often in tension with one another. What was the object of education: ‘to make men carpenters (or) to make carpenter men’?<sup>43</sup> This was a discomfiting dialectic that Dubois regarded as unresolved in black politics.

Others, though, were less anguished. In particular, across the course of the mid and late twentieth century education came to be seen by those in charge of government and industry as far preferable means of betterment for workers than unionized struggle. However, in our grandparents’ day education was but one pathway to security. The great shift of the late twentieth century, argues Marsh, was that in the absence of broader policies on tackling poverty, education came to be regarded, by default, as the *only* pathway to social mobility.<sup>44</sup>

Of course, Marsh does not argue that we should abandon political and economic investment in education. There is still an educational premium, however insecure, and since education (leaving aside for the moment its other riches) does contribute to the economic and social possibilities of individuals’ lives, then we must do all we can to ensure that everyone has the right to a good education and that no child is excluded because of poor resourcing or the education system’s low expectations. But educational campaigns alone will not erase poverty, only economic and political attention to welfare and wages can do that. Equalizing society is what will raise educational outcomes. So ‘when our notion of social and economic justice starts and stops with education, or when education ...displaces other tools needed to secure economic justice’<sup>45</sup> we err into misdiagnosis and social malpractice.

### **From social reproduction to social elimination**

The only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency.<sup>46</sup>

For me, reading David Blacker’s *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neo-liberal Endgame* called to mind the profound discomfort that Stuart Hall described in recalling his initial wrestling with Althusser. Blacker’s depiction of the fate of education in late capitalism is

both frightening and liberating - and I must add that ‘liberating’ is an odd word to use about a book that counsels fatalism among educators, a book that begins by warning:

I offer little uplift, though, and certainly no Boy Scout techniques for sustaining our current activities. As a philosopher I am committed to the deepest intellectual pessimism...<sup>47</sup>

I hope that what Blacker offers us is pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will. All the same, it is a book with conclusions that many progressive educators may fight off, even as recognition dawns. For Blacker, Marsh’s dictum that we cannot educate our way out of inequality is a truth laid bare. Not one to pull punches, Blacker begins by underlining his belief that we have entered capitalism’s terminal, dystopian phase:

...few have understood until recently just how literally... ‘terminal’ needs to be taken. As the ideological expression of the latest mutation of capitalism – a *systematically* hybridized monstrosity of state subsidy and oligargic monopolism ...neoliberalism amounts to an uncompromising thanatology. It is a deathwish that has taken hold of our collective mentality. It will eliminate first the poor and otherwise vulnerable and then it will kill all of us as it destroys the capacity of our planet to sustain human life. I mean that not as hyperbole but as sober extrapolation from present economic and environmental trends.<sup>48</sup>

In *The Falling Rate of Learning* Blacker reclaims unfashionable ideas about social reproduction and correspondence, but he also delves even further philosophically, reclaiming an idea of fate as a pattern of behaviour that produces a determined conclusion. The fate of terminal capitalism is, Blacker argues, final collapse under its own contradictions. These are terms that might be understood by any classical Marxist. However, what Blacker removes from the picture is a heroic depiction of the oppressed as the drivers of capitalism’s implosion. Perhaps they will be at the scene, perhaps not; and while something will emerge from its capitalism’s wreckage, there is no guarantee that it will be better. We cannot take comfort in the wish that the meek will inherit the earth.<sup>49</sup>

Is this vision hyperbolic? Is it male-pattern apocalyptic fantasy? Blacker argues that it is not. For there are two overarching phenomena that are in the process of determining capitalism’s

fate. Put simply, neo-liberal capitalism is fast running out of spaces in which to generate profit and fast running out of the natural resources that are its taken-for-granted lifeblood. Blacker draws upon one of Marx's key concepts: the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.<sup>50</sup> It is, even among Marxists a contentious theory<sup>51</sup> but, in brief, Marx holds that any profitable market will over time be eroded as industry's innovators are joined in that market space by competitors who are able to draw on the same technology that once gave the market innovators the edge. Paradoxically, therefore, as workers become *more* productive, enabling companies to turn out more goods, the profit generated by those goods that now flood the market declines.

The only option for capitalists is to bail out and find new markets (that will in their own turn first generate then lose profitability) or else drive down wages by battling organized labour and/ or reducing numbers of workers needed. As markets and natural resources dry up, the only option for capitalism – egoless and amoral, driven only by the creation of surplus – is to squeeze any remaining loose change from the global market. Thus we see further banking wheezes, public disinvestment, cuts in welfare budgets and variously enacted austerity measures. In the absence of bigger pickings, formerly unprofitable sectors such as education will either be fleeced or junked.

Like Marsh, Blacker argues that neo-liberalism, for all its education and training rhetoric, is dependent on consumerism and a low wage, low skill economy. Blacker's central thesis is that we are moving towards a world in which increasing numbers of people, both in the 'industrialized' and 'developing' economies, are barely exploitable any more. Indeed, if one looks at the African-American ghettos in which male imprisonment not college education is the norm, or the shanty worlds that shadow major urban centres in Africa, Asia and South America, in which millions are excluded from the normal economy, perhaps we are already there. And if this global class is barely exploitable, what profit is there in reproducing it?

Thus Blacker argues his dystopian concept of eliminationism. The word rightly strikes horror into us but, for Blacker, the idea that education and social policy will be increasingly predicated upon the dispensability of ever larger numbers of people is not alarmist, but merely 'a correspondence thesis to dull even to say much about.'<sup>52</sup> Each political system is fated to yield schools in its own image:

And within those school systems, predictably, individuals are slotted for the cultural and economic roles that their enviroing society makes for them, an iron law of correspondence ...The weak countercurrents that are commonly observable – however locally strong they might be – in the end only help to emphasize the direction in which the main body of the river still ineluctably flows.<sup>53</sup>

While Blacker invokes Bowles and Gintis, he is also aware of an unbridgeable historical gulf between himself and the earlier Marxist educational theorists. For the twenty-first century will not repeat the global economic patterns of the twentieth century. It is a point that is self-evident but too often evaded by the west's political classes. The current sweetheart of wishful social democrats, economist Thomas Piketty, has tried to puncture that delusion, emphasizing the exceptional shape of the twentieth century, which saw economic growth fuelled by large, rapid population increases, combined with the moderating effects of two world wars and the depression of the 1930s.<sup>54</sup> It will not happen again. The new century's character will instead include unregulated accumulation, unbowed increases in inequality and depleted energy reserves. As Blacker has it:

The era of exploitation is ending. Enter the era of elimination. Say goodbye to social reproduction, “working class kids getting working class jobs” and all the rest ...say hello to uselessness, disposability, precarity ...(for) the growing – and disproportionately young – ranks of the super-surplus humanity that has been squeezed out of a world that simply does not need even their hardest and most degrading labour.<sup>55</sup>

The risk of Blacker's take is that it becomes another version of the wait-until-the-revolution analysis that has so bedevilled alliances between white, male, hetero, non-disabled leftists and minoritized communities. Are we just being asked instead to wait for the apocalypse? Perhaps, but Blacker is, as he reminds us, a philosopher, not a policy-maker, still less a vanguardist. In the end Blacker takes us to a temporal dimension similar to that explored by Fredric Jameson. It is one in which we are asked to contemplate the long arc of socio-economic change, and to recognise ‘the radical incommensurability between human existence and the dynamic of collective history and production’.<sup>56</sup> The most hopeful response to the vast scale of our historical dilemma is that while there will be no quick casting off of capitalism's dehumanizing weight, there will all the time be very real cracks that open up and



which will not, in the long term, close again. And despite Blacker and Marsh's disavowals, education may be where some of those cracks open up, precisely because of the learning society's broken premises. For if the purpose of education is not to create social mobility and economic security, then it must have other purposes.

### **Act local**

Pauline's Lipman's *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: neoliberalism, race, and the right to the city*<sup>57</sup> is valuable precisely because of its understanding of the local. It examines how disinvestment and failed social mobility are felt in daily interactions, in particular cities. By recounting the dismantling of school systems in African-American and Latino communities in Chicago, Lipman explains the lived effects of neo-liberal politics on education. For Lipman, neo-liberalism is characterised by a shift from *government*, with its residual notions of democracy, accountability and general welfare, to *governance* by judicial and executive experts and managers. These managers are, in effect, state agents of capital; their role is to ensure terms of order that protect the market, and to manipulate public infrastructure accordingly.

In actually existing city politics, says Lipman, democracy and accountability have largely been eliminated. They are replaced by phony forms of participation and consumer choice, wherein advisory boards and public committees mime democratic rituals, while actual policy decisions are made elsewhere, according to steely criteria of efficiency and profit. The neo-liberal agenda is in large part secured by the constant undermining of public provision and the promotion of the privatization of essential services. Moreover, in urban settings the elimination of the public citizen and her replacement by the private consumer is embedded in the cultural politics of race, in 'a 400-year legacy of White supremacy ...pivotal to the (USA's) development, the triumph of capitalism, and more recently, to ...the neoliberal agenda.'<sup>58</sup> The white consumer is equated with the good, the private, while people of color are symbolically constructed as 'the undeserving poor (lazy, pathological, and welfare dependent).'<sup>59</sup> Thus:

Racism is the ideological soil for appeals to individual responsibility and ending 'dependency' on the state ...a rationale to restructure or eliminate government-funded social programs and to diminish state responsibility for social welfare.<sup>60</sup>

Day-to-day, these elimination contests are played out in struggles over ownership of cities' resources, struggles over who will shape service provision and distribution. This is where Lipman coheres both with Marsh's analysis of strategic disinvestment and the consequent distortion of the aims of schooling, and with Blacker's concept of eliminationism. Entire communities, principally Latino and African-American, are being voided; longstanding community institutions, such as schools, are declared substandard, to be reconfigured under private auspices in ways that control the participation and geographical location of undesirable communities.

Lipman describes how urban schools have become, over the past twenty-years, subject to 'new forms of top-down, punitive accountability and prescriptive standards, increased business involvement, and school leadership redefined as (corporate) managerialism.'<sup>61</sup> They have, in effect, become laboratories of future neo-liberal policy, wherein (as Marsh and Blacker also stress) the state becomes an increasingly unaccountable hybrid of public and private money and interests, in which teaching unions are marginalized, school boards are appointed with lack of transparency, and teaching and learning become ever more instrumentalized, organized around high-stakes testing. Lipman points out that 'Across African-American communities, schools have been closed for low achievement even when lower performing schools in other neighbourhoods were not.'<sup>62</sup> It is through this kind of school restructuring (which exists in symbiosis with the pathologization of the poor and the policing of communities of colour) that eliminationism is lived out.

As Lipman recounts, people in poor, minoritized communities have often aligned themselves with this neo-liberal restructuring: not because they are proletarian dupes but because they see the way the wind is blowing in terms of resourcing and what limited opportunities exist in education (plus, of course, because they rarely romanticize public schooling). Thus the elimination of public schools becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: disinvestment in poor communities; policy interventions by unelected venture philanthropists; the dominance of corporate private-public charter schools over grassroots charter initiatives; the prizing of 'choice' over communal good. These are all part of a creeping catastrophe for America's poor, already disadvantaged pupils.

Invoking Martin Luther King, Lipman urges transformation from a thing-orientated society to 'a person-orientated society grounded in radical political and economic democracy.'<sup>63</sup> In

education this will require a shift from diffuse protest politics to philosophically coherent ‘proactive education politics.’<sup>64</sup> At the end of her book Lipman outlines the principles that might frame the kind of education politics that go beyond achieving immediate tactical wins and instead ‘build the capacity of the working class and other people to fundamentally challenge power.’<sup>65</sup> Such a movement does not yet exist, not yet. But there is no shame in being longer on critique than solutions. Proactive educational politics will require ‘a sophisticated understanding of the complex system we are up against and a multifaceted vision of the world we wish to see.’<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

So are we now living the dystopia? Is the concept of education for social justice as limited as Marsh and Blacker, particularly, seem to suggest? I think we need to begin by acknowledging the political value of what Blacker terms ‘pessimism’. For sober pessimism need not bind us into political and educational paralysis. In other words, pessimism need not be an eternal diagnosis but rather the imperative for change. As educators, we are in a position to construct visions of hope that remain embedded in realistic appraisals of current social conditions. And our realism need not be the ‘realism’ promoted by neo-liberal ideology, wherein we are assured that capitalism and its anti-human excesses are our permanent fate. Our realism lies in grasping the fact that for the majority of humanity, the best of capitalism is over; only shanty-futures are available in the long term. So we are pessimistic about what our current socio-economic mode can offer humanity, but the current mode is not eternal.

And to return to my earlier point, educators are well placed to identify the cracks that will not be sealed. If the purpose of education is not to create ‘good jobs’ or secure futures, then it must have other purposes. Schools and universities are under assault as public spaces but, despite this, they *are* still public spaces. What educators are in a position to do is to work with students to reject the notion of education as private property, a space in which alienated individuals store up credentials that will serve markets and corporations. We can learn from, and teach off the back of, the failed premises of the learning society, using the arts, humanities, sciences and vocations to argue for principles of public good and mutual social obligations; to argue for a commitment to use knowledge in public life to confront power and rethink democracy as a daily practice, not merely an electoral habit.

But we should heed Blacker and Marsh's call for a new modesty among educators. For that modesty is also an acknowledgment of the need for alliances, and the spaces that already exist for alliances between education and other fields. Let us acknowledge the limits of schooling as a force for change and look for spaces in which education can contribute to wider political-economic struggles. Education will only be one node in these networks of democratic resistance. That scaling down will take some humility and also some atonement for the deals that progressives have made over recent decades, albeit out of good intentions, with the 'learning society' agenda. In activist spaces there is plenty to address: student fees; governments' attempts to tie welfare to participation in education and training; surveillance through school and universities of Muslim communities; and the continued racialization, gendering and classing of educational pathways.

Some years ago I was at a conference on education and social justice where a delegate announced, 'Why don't we stop trying to make people's lives better through education ... and just make their lives better?' There was immediate silence. Let us now break it.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: how working class kids get working-class jobs* (Aldershot: Gower, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses", in *Education: structure and society*, ed. Ben Cosin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Bowles and Herb Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> Madan Sarup, *Marxism and Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Their writing was collected in Farrukh Dhondy, Barbara Beese and Leila Hassan, *The Black Explosion in British Schools* (London: Race Today, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Pauline Lipman, *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: neoliberalism, race, and the right to the city* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> John Marsh, *Class Dismissed: why we cannot teach our way out of inequality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> David Blacker, *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neo-liberal Endgame* (Washington: Zero).

<sup>9</sup> Blacker, *Falling Rate*, 15.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Stewart Ranson, *Inside the Learning Society* (London: Cassell Education, 1998); Michael Apple, *Educating the Right Way* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2001); James Avis, *Education*

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*Policy and Social Justice: learning and skills* (London: Continuum, 2007); Dave Hill, *Marxist Essays on Neoliberalism, Class, 'Race', Capitalism and Education* (Brighton: Institute for Education Policy Studies, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Angela Y. Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom: and other difficult dialogues* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2012) and Karen Graham “Does School Prepare Men for Prison?” *City* (forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> Sarup, *Marxism and Education*, 136.

<sup>13</sup> Mike Cole, *Marxism and Educational Theory: origins and issues* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Althusser, “Ideology and ideological state apparatuses”, 248-280.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond Morrow and Carlos Torres, *Social Theory and Education: a critique of theories of social and cultural reproduction* (New York: State University of New York, 1995) 9.

<sup>16</sup> Sarup, *Marxism and Education*, 136.

<sup>17</sup> Sarup, *Marxism and Education*, 136.

<sup>18</sup> Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*.

<sup>19</sup> Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Willis, *Learning to Labour*, 2

<sup>21</sup> Willis, *Learning to Labour*, 179.

<sup>22</sup> Willis, *Learning to Labour*, 179.

<sup>23</sup> David Blacker, *Falling Rate*, 102

<sup>24</sup> See Paul Warmington, *Black British Intellectuals and Education: multiculturalism's hidden history* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Farrukh Dhondy *et al*, *Black Explosion*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> A. Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger: writings on black resistance* (London: Pluto).

<sup>27</sup> A. Sivanandan, *Different Hunger*, 49.

<sup>28</sup> See for instance, Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, *The Jobless Future* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Stephen Ball, *The Education Debate* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2008); Henry Giroux, *America's Education Deficit and the War on Youth: reform beyond electoral politics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Ball, *Education Debate*, 39.

<sup>30</sup> John Marsh, *Class Dismissed*, 9-13

<sup>31</sup> Patrick Ainley, *Degrees of Difference: higher education in the 1990's* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1994) 15.

<sup>32</sup> Industry in Education, *Towards Employability: addressing the gap between young people's qualities and employers' recruitment needs* (London: Industry in Education, 1996).

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- <sup>33</sup> Denis Gleeson “Post-compulsory education in a post-industrial and post-modern age” in *Knowledge and Nationhood: education, politics and work*, eds. James Avis, Martin Bloomer, Geoff Esland, Denis Gleeson, Phil Hodgkinson (London: Cassell, 1996) 83.
- <sup>34</sup> Patrick Ainley and Bill Bailey, *The Business of Learning: staff and student experiences of further education in the 1990s* (London: Cassell, 1997) 5.
- <sup>35</sup> Ainley, *Degrees of Difference*, 18.
- <sup>36</sup> Marsh, *Class Dismissed*.
- <sup>37</sup> Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: why more equal societies almost always do better* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).
- <sup>38</sup> Marsh, *Class Dismissed*, 167.
- <sup>39</sup> Marsh, *Class Dismissed*, 166.
- <sup>40</sup> Marsh, *Class Dismissed*, 82.
- <sup>41</sup> Marsh, *Class Dismissed*, 22.
- <sup>42</sup> Marsh, *Class Dismissed*, 84.
- <sup>43</sup> WEB Dubois, *The Education of Black People: ten critiques, 1906-1960* (New York: Monthly Review Press) 64.
- <sup>44</sup> Marsh, *Class Dismissed*, 89.
- <sup>45</sup> Marsh, *Class Dismissed*, 212.
- <sup>46</sup> Stuart Hall “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies”, in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), 280.
- <sup>47</sup> Blacker, *Falling Rate*, 22.
- <sup>48</sup> Blacker, *Falling Rate*, 16-17.
- <sup>49</sup> Blacker, *Falling Rate*, 58.
- <sup>50</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: a critique of political economy, Volume 1* (London, Penguin, 1976/ 1883).
- <sup>51</sup> See Alex, Callinicos *The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx* (London: Marx, 1996).
- <sup>52</sup> Blacker, *Falling Rate*, 99.
- <sup>53</sup> Blacker, *Falling Rate*, 99.
- <sup>54</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- <sup>55</sup> Blacker, *Falling Rate*, 101-2.
- <sup>56</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009) 370.
- <sup>57</sup> Lipman, *New Political Economy*.
- <sup>58</sup> Lipman, *New Political Economy*, 12.
- <sup>59</sup> Lipman, *New Political Economy*, 12.
- <sup>60</sup> Lipman, *New Political Economy*, 12.
- <sup>61</sup> Lipman, *New Political Economy*, 46.

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<sup>62</sup> Lipman, *New Political Economy*, 54.

<sup>63</sup> Lipman, *New Political Economy*, 162.

<sup>64</sup> Lipman, *New Political Economy*, 23.

<sup>65</sup> Lipman, *New Political Economy*, 164.

<sup>66</sup> Lipman, *New Political Economy*, 163.