

LOCATING RESPONSIBILITY IN THE DISCOURSE OF CONTEMPORARY U.S.
EDUCATION REFORM

by

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DEDICATION

For Katie and Olivia

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	8
ABSTRACT.....	9
INTRODUCTION.....	10
Spacing	11
The political economy of knowledge production.....	13
Schooling and governance.....	17
The everyday geopolitics of schooling.....	20
Conclusion	21
THE PRESENT STUDY	23
Methodological Framework.....	23
Paper A	25
Paper B.....	27
Paper C	28
REFERENCES.....	30
APPENDIX A: Education Reform as Ascriptive Emplacement	36
Abstract.....	37
Introduction.....	37
The Troubled Home.....	42
The Chaotic Classroom	57
Conclusion	79
References.....	83
APPENDIX B: Human capital and uneven development.....	97

Abstract.....	98
Introduction.....	98
Human Capital Theory.....	105
Forging the Supply-Side Consensus.....	118
Human Capital in the 21st Century.....	134
Conclusion.....	144
References.....	151
APPENDIX C: The Apologetic Geographies of Contemporary U.S. Education Reform.....	170
Abstract.....	171
Introduction.....	171
Deconstructing Reform.....	174
The Call for Education Reform as Apology.....	177
Conclusion.....	194
References.....	201
APPENDIX D: Conclusions and Suggested Applications.....	220
Conclusions.....	221
Suggested Applications.....	226
References.....	230

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 – The similar trajectories of “human capital” and “welfare reform”	103
Figure 2 – A normal distribution and a positively skewed distribution	106
Figure 3 – The Phillips Curve for the U.S. estimated by Samuelson and Solow (1960) ..	120
Figure 4 – The Laffer Curve	124
Figure 5 – The Declining Labor Share Over the Last 70 Years in the U.S.	139
Figure 6 – The Geography of Public School Approval in the U.S.	173
Figure 7 – The decoupling of labor productivity and labor compensation, 1948-2014 ...	183

ABSTRACT

Framed by insights from critical human geography, political economy, and educational studies, this dissertation offers a critique of the contemporary education reform movement in the United States (hereafter U.S.). The overarching argument made here is that the powerfully positioned individuals and groups at the head of this movement have been less motivated by a desire to actually pursue social justice than by the political expediency that comes with appearing to be doing so. The three papers that follow speak to the existing critical literature on public schooling in the U.S., which argues that the perpetual discussion about how to ‘fix’ the U.S.’s educational system should be seen as an attempt by its powerfully positioned interlocutors to collapse popular discontent with a variety of persistent social injustices into a focused dissatisfaction with the public schools. This literature has also argued that although the public education system in the U.S. is indeed quite inequitable as it presently exists, and thus an appropriate target for transformation, the education reform movement’s efforts to that end have actually reproduced many of the social and pedagogical causes of educational inequity. This dissertation builds on the literature just summarized by demonstrating that the rhetoric of the individuals and groups associated with the education reform movement coalesces around a spatial discourse through which the causes of a variety of social ills are presented as endogenous to the spaces inhabited by the individuals and groups that suffer them with the greatest frequency and intensity. Further, the artificially discrete, enclosed spaces conjured in the name of education reform are enrolled as part of a broader project of legitimizing coercive, individualizing, and competitive – rather than supportive, dialogic, collaborative – forms of pedagogy, and governance more generally.

INTRODUCTION

In a series of three papers, this dissertation uses insights from critical human geography, political economy, and educational studies to analyze the tension between the sentiment expressed in the U.S. education reform movement's rhetorical appeals to the public and the political logic implied by its practical conduct. In doing so, I look to add to an existing body of critical scholarship which contends that the seemingly perpetual discussion about how to 'fix' the U.S.'s 'failing' public education system should be viewed as an attempt by its powerfully positioned interlocutors to collapse popular frustration with a variety of structural injustices into a focused criticism of the public school system (e.g. Barkan, 2011; Berliner, 2013; Foster, 2011; Marsh, 2011; Ravitch, 2013; Spring, 1989). Existing work in this area has drawn needed attention to the political influence, financial resources, and cultural cues that elites at the head of the reform movement have drawn on in their efforts to establish as commonsensical the idea that ineffective public schooling is responsible for class-based, racial, and gendered inequities (rather than the other way around). I look to contribute to this discussion by arguing that there is also a geographical dimension to the reform movement's discursive tactics.

In Paper A, entitled "Education Reform as Ascriptive Emplacement," I suggest that although the reform movement has sought to position itself as an important part of the struggle for social justice, the reforms it promotes instead help to normalize and legitimize the very practices responsible for the material deprivation and everyday insecurity faced by exploited and oppressed groups. I argue that its rationalization of these reforms hinges on the assumption that persistent social ills in the U.S. are endogenous to the spaces inhabited by the people who suffer from them with the greatest intensity. Paper B, entitled "Human capital and uneven development," explores the origins and contemporary political significance of the term "human

capital.” I argue that the connotations of the term have been used to facilitate and rationalize efforts to replace the downwardly redistributive mechanisms of the Welfare State with promised upgrades in knowledge and skill as the primary liberal approach to reducing poverty and inequality. In Paper C, entitled “The Apologetic Geographies of Education Reform,” I show that the rhetoric of the education reform movement implicitly reifies the nation-state and the national macro-economy as aggrieved parties with respect to the public education system’s alleged failure to adequately educate the country’s youth. I then argue that this reification is meant to limit the perceived range of feasible solutions to social ills to those that are compatible with existing social arrangements.

Spacing

A thread running through Papers A, B, and C is an attempt to uncover the spatial constructs (and ongoing constructions) that underlie the rhetorical appeals of the education reform movement. My efforts to that end were inspired by Joel Wainwright’s concept of “spacing,” as deployed in *Decolonizing Development* (Wainwright, 2008, see p. 23-27). An explanation of the relevance of this term to the present dissertation requires a very short summary of the book’s topic, goals, and arguments.

Wainwright begins by claiming that an identity has been effected between the ‘development’ of the global south and the imposition of capitalist governmentalities (and the attendant human-environment relations) on targeted populations there (the book names this identity “capitalism qua development”). In other words, ‘development’ has become a fig leaf for the colonial and/or neo-colonial re-configuration of a given society around the imperatives of the profit motive. Examining more than a century’s worth of efforts to ‘develop’ in this fashion what is today southern Belize, and the mass of texts through which these efforts have been both

documented and legitimized by representatives of Western empires, Wainwright shows that the textual production of space has been a key element of the West's rationale for ongoing forms of pro-capital intervention in the global south, despite the failure of this model to correct the massive imbalances of wealth and political power between developers and developpees.

To that end, Wainwright uses “spacing,” a methodological tool he describes as “a mode of reading” that “examines the constitution of spaces and highlights the ways spatiality makes possible the work of a text” (2008, p. 24). To “space” the discourse of developmentalism that is the focus of *Decolonizing Development*, Wainwright shows how representatives from states with colonial/neocolonial interests in British Honduras/Belize constructed a national space for its indigenous Mayan people so as to assign to the inhabitants of this conjured territory a distinct, essentially Mayan set of economic practices and human-environment relations. Justification for development was then created by imputing the cause of Mayan *underdevelopment* to the differences between the practical elements and ways of thinking characterizing this composite Mayan cultural system and those prevailing in the neo/colonial metropole. In other words, specifically Mayan norms and practices needed to be textually produced and located in a defined space in order to create a benighted Mayan ‘inside’ in need of intervention from an expert ‘outside’ (i.e. the global north). Of pre-capitalist agriculture in the Belizean proto-nation-state, for example, Wainwright writes: “[t]he Maya system was made. It is a work of fiction – not untrue, but manufactured. [...] the Maya farm system was *made to be developed*” (p. 88, emphasis added).

A key element of the argument made in the three papers that constitute this dissertation is that the contemporary education reform movement in the U.S., like the European and American ‘developers’ of Belize, has sought to justify its imposition of a self-serving ‘fix’ to a problem

that it has itself ‘manufactured’ through the rhetorical construction of bounded, allegedly dysfunctional spaces. Wainwright’s approach to ‘spacing’ therefore provides the forthcoming analysis of this process with two guidelines. First, it serves as a reminder that neither demarcated spaces nor the corresponding social groupings that give them political meaning exist as such prior to the discursive acts that bring them into existence. Second, effectively “spacing” a set of texts (broadly defined) means exposing the discursive inscription of deficiencies on to a group of people designated as such by their shared inhabitation of a textually produced space, as an effort to justify paternalistic forms of power over this group by another, more powerful group.

I look to ‘space’ the narrative of the education reform movement by drawing out the unexamined geographical constructs that structure its rhetorical appeals to the public, and by discussing the ways these acts of spatial construction support the assumption underlying the reform movement’s public narrative that the best way to address social ills is to, in the words of historian Michael Katz, ‘improve poor people’ (1997). I argue that by directing its ‘apologies’ to the level of the nation-state, the reform movement effectively sidesteps recognition of the many inequities and injustices that a finer-grained examination of social life would reveal. I also suggest that by promising to take action in a set of constructed spaces inhabited by marginalized and oppressed groups, the movement’s advocacy work deliberately mystifies the broader, structural causes of social injustice.

The political economy of knowledge production

In a section of the *Grundrisse* sometimes referred to as the “fragment on machines” (e.g. Vercellone, 2007; Virno, 2007), Marx (1993 [1939]) uses the term “general intellect” alternatively with “the general productive forces of the social brain” as shorthand for a given society’s accumulated scientific/technological knowledge. Marx argues that in capitalist

societies, expansion of and control over the “general intellect” becomes a high priority for capital because the application of scientific knowledge on the factory floor – in the form of more powerful machines, a more efficient distribution of tasks, cheaper sources of energy, etc. – allows firms to overcome the boundaries on labor productivity otherwise imposed by the biological limitations and/or will of waged laborers. In making the connection between knowledge production and capital accumulation, Marx begins to explain one part of the reason that capital (as a class), has long pushed for the establishment of, and sought to exert influence over, public educational systems.

Picking up on Marx’s work in this area, Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1998 [1974]) argues that one of capitalism’s key innovations was the separation of the ‘conception’ of production from its actual ‘execution,’ i.e. the splitting off of mental labor (planning, engineering) from physical labor (processing, assembly). As a scarce ‘commodity,’ specialized knowledge tends to command a premium on the labor market. But by concentrating the relatively well-paid ‘knowledge work’ of the firm among a handful of employees who design a work system requiring very little skill from all other workers, the majority of the firm’s positions could be designated ‘un’ or ‘low’-skilled, and paid commensurately low wages. The class of knowledge workers was then also used to drive wages down even further by developing ways to shift a progressively greater share of the workload from human labor to machinery (reducing the demand for, and therefore price of, labor). Ironically, then, Braverman pointed out that the so-called ‘knowledge economy’ – already celebrated as such in the popular press when *Labor and Monopoly Capital* was first published in the early 1970s – was in fact characterized by a significant *reduction* in the amount of thinking most laborers were required to do on the job (see also Caffentzis & Federici, 2007).

By the first few decades of the 20th century, both the strategically imposed technical division of labor within the firm and capital's control over scientific research and development (through grants, establishment of massive R&D facilities, etc.) more broadly were normalized, giving capitalism the peculiar, contradictory tendency of constantly pushing against the frontiers of knowledge, while discouraging the kind of higher order thinking characterizing 'knowledge work' among a growing share of the working population. Put differently, Braverman observed that, like capital itself, as the total mass of the "general intellect" grew, control over its use and further development tended to be drawn in ever tighter among a progressively smaller group of individuals. Thus Braverman thought of public schooling primarily as a means of socializing future workers:

[i]t is...not so much what the child learns that is important as what he or she becomes wise to. In school, the child and the adolescent practice what they will later be called upon to do as adults: the conformity to routines, the manner in which they will be expected to snatch from the fast moving machinery their needs and wants. (p. 199)

Braverman was writing when industrial capital was still the leading form (i.e. before the 'financialization' of the U.S. economy in the 1980s [Krippner, 2005]), and it is common to hear education reformers and their allies claim that with the transition into a service-based economy, knowledge work is, or soon will be, now the most common type. Yet according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a majority of the most rapidly expanding occupations in the near future are those requiring a high school diploma or less (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). This seems to largely confirm Braverman's thesis that, even in the face of widespread excitement about the arrival of a 'knowledge economy' (e.g. Duncan, 2011; Leberecht, 2014; OECD, 1996; Rainie,

2016), opportunities to apply knowledge in one's place of employment are still rather limited in scope.

Like Braverman, Katharyne Mitchell (2003) has argued that public education systems not only transmit knowledge and/or skills, but also contribute to the production of identities, reinforce power relations, and help assimilate students to the changing needs of the state and capital. Mitchell points out, however, that while critical educational theorists and historians have thoroughly documented the temporal links between the changing imperatives of capital and adjustments to the state's educational objectives (e.g. Katz, 1971; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977; Apple, 1979), they have typically neglected to account for the spatiality inherent in state governance generally, and the way that geopolitical and geoeconomic concerns inform the state's construction of ideally educated subjects more specifically. Seeking to fill this gap, Mitchell shows how public schooling in the U.S. has shifted its focus over the 20th century from an effort to cultivate 'multicultural selves,' tolerant of racial/cultural integration in exchange for the relative security of nationalized Keynesian Fordism, to the creation of 'strategic cosmopolitans' prepared to aggressively compete with their peers across the globe for access to upward mobility in response to the gradual withdrawal of governmental efforts to secure a place for the individual in the national economy.

Mitchell's explanation here offers not only a needed spatial component to the left's broad critique of the contemporary education reform movement, but also a clue as to how the reformers have managed to sell their narrowly vocational model of schooling to much of the public. Neoliberalism's erosion of the 'welfare state' on the one hand, and the (physical and logistical) borders to capital mobility on the other, have caused individuals to depend increasingly upon their capacity to continuously outcompete peers from across the globe for a place in the

engineered instability of the international labor market. By framing its educational policies as an effort to provide children with the competencies they'll need to survive in this environment as adults (e.g. Duncan, 2009, 2011, 2013a), the reformers are able to claim a kind of paternal benevolence as a defense against charges of indoctrination.

Schooling and governance

Like Marx, Gramsci (1971) considered intellectual development to be a crucially important 'motor of history.' But for Gramsci, the political functions of knowledge and intellectual labor – often more implicit than explicit in Marx's non-journalistic works – took center stage. Gramsci seemed to be particularly interested in the role professional intellectuals played in the maintenance of hegemony, or the capacity to govern acquired and maintained first and foremost by generating consent among those to be governed. To this end, Gramsci disaggregated societal knowledge across its differentially positioned carriers: those actively engaged in knowledge work on the one hand, and those assigned a primarily physical role in the division of labor, on the other. Gramsci argued that the former were effectively used by hegemonic, or hegemony-aspiring, class fractions to regulate the circulation of ideas and the production of knowledge so as to normalize its own 'conception of the world.'

Importantly, Gramsci also claimed that the division of intellectual and non-intellectual labor was a product of politics rather than differentials in intelligence and/or merit. For Gramsci, this binary was a false one, because all humans possessed the capacity for higher order thinking. In order to avoid reifying the artificial distinction between intellectuals and 'non-intellectuals' – and those often drawn between the economic base and politico-cultural superstructure, and between the state and civil society – Gramsci developed the concept of the 'historical bloc' as a means of dialectically analyzing the role of each in the movement of the whole, at a particular

time and in a particular place (Hall, 1986; Mann, 2009). The ‘historical bloc’ was Gramsci’s term for a spatially and temporally situated hegemony, in which a particular set of social arrangements between elites and subalterns was secured by a strata of intellectuals and a set of “hegemonic apparatuses” (Bollinger & Koivisto, 2009) tasked with manufacturing tolerance of this relationship. In Gramsci’s schema this task involved obscuring the irreconcilable class differences inherent to capitalist societies by fabricating, immemorializing, and generating allegiance to a supposedly class-transcendent ‘national’ culture. Keeping with his notion of hegemony as a mode of control accomplished first through consent, hegemonic apparatuses in Gramsci’s framework are those institutions of ‘civil society’ that subjects engage with largely of their own volition, including the public schools (Gramsci, 1971; Forgacs, 2000).

Gramsci’s theorization of hegemony also made use of a particular notion of the term ‘common sense.’ With this term Gramsci referred to the “fragmentary” and “incoherent” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 419) world-views of the subaltern masses, arrived at through “crude sensation” (p. 420) as opposed to critical and sustained analysis of one’s circumstances and positionality. By appealing to the immediacy of sensation rather than the depth of intellect, hegemonic groups effectively preempt widespread demand for radical social change. In this way, Gramscian ‘common sense’ plays a similar role to what Marcuse (1991) described as “one-dimensional” thinking, or the tendency for an epistemological preoccupation with the actual (“dimension”) to preempt thought about the possible/imaginable (“dimensions”). Marcuse argued that this preoccupation was effected and reproduced through normalization of the view that existing economic/political conditions were the practically sound and socially just telos of more or less continual socio-historical improvement, and that radical alternatives were therefore unnecessary, if not irrational. Writing mostly in the third quarter of the 20th century, Marcuse

was specifically interested in how the Keynesian state's subsidization of consumer culture was used to contain aspirations for radical change by surreptitiously manufacturing 'needs' and then helping to ensure that the satisfaction of those 'needs' was attainable for a growing share of the population.

This "administered" prosperity not only created a large, pacified, and therefore inertial bloc in the U.S. electorate, but also facilitated elite efforts to paint economic crises and societal injustices as anomalous and individualized rather than cyclical and structural, and thereby helped legitimize targeted adjustments to existing arrangements as a substitute for a rethinking of first principles (Marcuse, 1991). Reform, in other words, serves just as much a tool for beating back demands for fundamental social change as a means of actually addressing social problems. When the rhetorical radicalism is peeled away from contemporary state-led discussions of education reform (healthcare reform, immigration reform, tax reform, prison reform, welfare reform, etc.) one finds support for Marcuse's contention that, however urgent these issues are said to be, reforms rarely if ever amount to more than a gesture at "improving the existing social conditions, within the framework of the existing societal institutions" (ibid, p. 107).

Much of Marcuse's work focused on the psychological obstacles to radical social change, and psychoanalytical concepts and terminology appear often in his work. However, Marcuse was critical of psychoanalysis as practice on the ground that in seeking the source of emotional and/or mental distress in the individual psyche it tended to assume away the possibility that distress could result from contradictions between the 'healthy'/'normal' human psyche and the reality it was forced to endure because of prevailing social relations (Marcuse, 1971). In other words, by legitimizing the view that psychological problems were individualized and should be treated on a case-by-case basis, psychoanalysis became a kind of individuated 'reform,' blinding

the client to the possible roots of their distress in the structural injustices of late capitalist society. Marcuse was critical of public education systems for a similar reason, namely, for doing more to adjust individuals to unjust/inequitable societies than to change these societies in accordance with what would allow people to live fulfilled lives (Kellner, 2009). Marcuse argued that if public education were to contribute to progressive social change, it would need to contribute to the cultivation of a “new subject” capable of overcoming the status quo’s intellectual ‘one-dimensionality,’ and *incapable* of tolerating its repressive, alienating, and ecologically destructive tendencies (Marcuse, 1971, 1974, 1992). It was left to Marcuse’s readers to determine exactly how/where this new education itself was to be brought into existence, but it is clear that the ethos of today’s elite-led education reform movement runs in the opposite direction (see Adamson, 2009; Au, 2009, 2011; Demerath et al 2008; Gaudelli & Heilman, 2009; Giroux, 2010; Lipman, 2003; Mitchell, 2003; Nguyen, 2014; Saltman & Goodman, 2003; Scott, 2011). It therefore seems likely that if public schools are to play a role in building the intellectually autonomous, humane, ecologically sensitive subjectivity Marcuse described, an equally dedicated, consciously political alternative to this movement must first materialize.

The everyday geopolitics of schooling

In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Debord argued that in ‘modern’ societies representation had triumphed over direct experience, and that the power to represent had become concentrated in the hands of, and in the form of, capital. Because the worldview encouraged by capital’s representation of things contains a particular set of understandings as to what is normal and abnormal, desirable and undesirable, the spectacle also dictates the terms on which particular kinds of state actions are to take place. Borrowing from Debord, Cindi Katz has described childhood in the U.S. as a spectacle, in that it has been fetishistically represented in certain ways

by the state in order to justify a particular set of interventions into it (Katz, 2008). Specifically, Katz argues that childhood is now presented as an investment opportunity through which both parents and the state each attempt to secure their economic and geopolitical futures, and also as a site where risk-management strategies are applied with the goal of stamping out ‘unproductive’ habits and/or potentially ‘counterhegemonic’ behaviors.

As parents are inundated with warnings about the intensified educational and occupational competition their children will face as adults, and as pre- and proxy-crime fighting gather acceptance as the ‘new normal’ of policing strategy (Mitchell, 2010; Brecher, 2013; Greenfield, 2013) familial and state resources alike are increasingly dedicated to educational institutions so as to positively (e.g. test-prep classes, private tutors) and punitively (e.g. CCTV and RFID surveillance mechanisms in schools, over-medication) shape individual behaviors in accordance with state-sanctioned norms (see also Katz, 2011). The public school, in other words, has become a site where investments are made and risks are managed based on a rendering of childhood as a contingency to be securitized.

Conclusion

Taken together, these literatures provide the foundation on which the geographical discourse of the education reform movement will be critiqued in the three papers that follow. *Paper A* ‘spaces’ the education reform movement’s rehabilitation of the culture of poverty thesis, showing how its rationalization of oppressive, panoptic pedagogies in poor/minority schools relies on an implicit construction of low-income/non-white households and neighborhoods as bounded sites through which social pathologies are generated and reproduced. *Paper A* demonstrates that these pedagogies are consistent with Katz’s contention that social reproduction

under neoliberal governance treats young people, especially low-income and minority youth, as a risk to be managed.

Paper B historicizes and makes a political economic critique of what I call the human capital narrative – a story told through the media by the education reform movement that attributes poverty and economic inequality to a gap that supposedly exists between the knowledge and skills demanded by the labor market and the supply of knowledgeable and skilled laborers made available by the public education system. *Paper B* ‘spaces’ the human capital narrative by calling into question its implicit assumption that directing resources to an institution operating over a particular place amounts to the same thing as directing resources to the residents of that place. Following Mitchell, *Paper B* also explores the social implications of the competitive, individualized ethic at the heart of the human capital narrative.

Finally, *Paper C* draws on a Gramscian notion of hegemony and proposes that reformism serves as a means of addressing the public’s frustration over the persistence of social ills without directly addressing the social ills themselves, or the social arrangements that perpetuate them. *Paper C* shows that the education reform movement – a movement led and coordinated by political and economic elites – has centered its appeals to the public on the effects the U.S.’s allegedly underperforming public education system has had on the nation-state and macro economy. Finally, *Paper C* shows that centering of the macro-economy and ‘national defense’ has had the effect of limiting the discussion of what might be done to address persistent social ills to ideas that do not call for fundamental change to the existing social order.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The three papers appended to this dissertation lay out the entirety of its findings. The following sections briefly lay out the questions addressed by each paper, and the methodology employed to answer them.

Methodological Framework

Through a close, critical reading of a variety of texts produced by the education reform movement, this dissertation aims to show that the ongoing discussion of how to “fix” the U.S.’s “failing” public school system represents an attempt by its elite interlocutors to translate public discontent into support for educational initiatives that entrench, rather than significantly alter or replace, existing social relations. The primary methodological approach employed to that end is critical discourse analysis.

The term ‘discourse’ in this context refers to a rhetorical framing that encourages and enables certain things to be communicated while at the same time discouraging others (McHoul & Grace, 1993). Discourses, in this sense, are significant because they influence the way people interpret and engage with the world, and relate to one another. According to Dixon (2010), critical discourse analysis involves an effort to understand what brought a particular discourse into existence, why particular discourses are brought it into existence in the form they are, how individuals gain access to or have their thought absorbed by particular discourses, and the influence that particular discourses have on the way people act.

Critical discourse analyses commonly rely on a Foucaultian understanding of the term discourse, and are therefore obligated to treat discursive power as “capillary,” and therefore beyond the grasp of individual human agency. Accordingly, methodological guidebooks often warn readers to avoid attributing the formation or prevalence of particular discourses to

individuals and/or groups (e.g. McHoul & Grace, 1993; Scheurich & McKenzie, 2008), and advise against assuming that the meanings taken from discursive objects match those intended by their producers (e.g. Dixon, 2010). While Foucault (1991) conceded that “[e]ach discourse undergoes constant change and new utterances are added to it,” (p. 54), he argued against the idea that there could be an “all-powerful subject” (p. 58) crafting and then wielding any particular discourse against other subjects or groups of subjects in the pursuit of particular ends.

The model of discourse analysis used by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1994), on the other hand, treated the discourse of ‘Orientalism’ as the product of “willed human work” (p. 15), and as a powerful, *purposive* influence over subsequent work in the same or a related field, at the same time. By seeking to “reveal the dialectic between the individual text or writer and the complex collective formation to which [their] work is a contribution” (p. 24), Said gave equal weight to the discourse of ‘Orientalism’ (through which British, French, and American authorities over the present-day West Asia have been naturalized and justified) and its geopolitically motivated authors.

Because the three papers of this dissertation seek to illustrate not only how particular framings of schooling have guided public debate/discussion about education reform, but also how particular groups and agents have deliberately sought to impose a particular frame around discussions of the purpose and problems of the U.S. public educational system, Saidian rather than Foucaultian discourse analysis will be used to analyze the documents that constitute the archive of the education reform movement. Specifically, the methodology employed in this dissertation treats discourse as a rhetorical entity propagated through narratives, which are broadcast to the public in texts produced by interested authors seeking to render their account of some aspect of the world authoritative, or at least influential.

The analysis in each paper was completed in four stages. First, I searched for consistent themes, claims, and ideological indicators across a representative sample of texts produced by individuals and groups affiliated with the education reform movement. I then extracted from these texts the assumptions that seemed to underlie their constitutive themes, claims, and ideological indicators. Third, I interrogated these assumptions in light of available empirics, and developed an explanation for the persistence of the former in light of its contradiction with the latter. Below I briefly lay out the questions asked by, texts scrutinized in, and findings of, each of the three papers of this dissertation.

Paper A

Paper A, titled “Education Reform as Ascriptive Emplacement,” asks what the nature of the reforms called for by the education reform movement indicate about the elites’ diagnosis of the causes of persistent social ills in the U.S. Critical discourse analysis was performed on five categories of documents. In the first category are two reports published by individuals affiliated with the federal government in the 1960s that have since become hugely influential on the geographical imaginary of the education reform movement: *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, written by Assistant Secretary of Labor and future Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965), and therefore often referred to as ‘The Moynihan Report’, and *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, commissioned and published by the U.S. Office of Education and often referred to as ‘The Coleman Report,’ after its lead author, sociologist James Coleman (1966). I suggest that most existing critiques of these two documents either miss the mark, or do not go far enough.

I then trace the genealogy of these reports through the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), sometimes

referred to as the ‘Welfare Reform’ Act. The second category of documents analyzed in *Paper A* include Congressional documents laying out the purposes of PRWORA, essays written by conservative academics advocating the kind of paternalistic governance hinted at in the Moynihan Report and enacted by the PRWORA, and articles written by self-styled liberal journalists rehabilitating the Moynihan Report and the ‘culture of poverty thesis’ that it, and the PRWORA, embody, for largely liberal audiences.

The third, fourth, and fifth categories include texts that are synergistic and representative of the application of paternalism and the culture of poverty to educational policy in the U.S. over the last four decades. The third category includes foundational essays in the field of Positive Psychology, and offshoot studies on the academic cultivation of ‘grit,’ with which education reformers have sought to counter the supposedly counterproductive mindsets of disadvantaged youth. The fourth category includes documents through which a set of charter and public schools have advertised their use of so-called “No Excuses” or “Zero Tolerance” disciplinary policies, which serve as a supplement to positive psychology and grit by mandating the close monitoring and regimentation of the physical behavior of students. The fifth and final category of documents are pieces of education reform legislation enacted since the 1980s that have been aimed at proscribing the curricular content and pedagogical practice used by public school teachers.

Reading these texts in concert, *Paper A* argues that beneath the veneer created by the education reform movement’s appeal to civil rights and social equity lays a set of pedagogical and disciplinary procedures meant to ensure the behavioral, psychological, and intellectual passivity of low-income and minoritized youth. The archive of the reform movement attributes the macro-economic stagnation and national insecurity that supposedly plague the U.S. on a set

of social pathologies that are allegedly endogenous to the homes and classrooms in primarily black, Hispanic, and/or poor neighborhoods: defeatism, unruliness, and intellectual apathy. To coerce zeal and normalize hierarchical forms of knowledge production, the reform movement has promoted a set of abusive pedagogical practices and deeply unjust school disciplinary procedures that require low-income, black, and/or Hispanic children to superimpose a set of extrinsically engineered emotions and sensibilities (optimism, tenacity, “grit”) over those that manifest organically from their interaction with an unjust world. To justify the imposition of these practices almost exclusively on disadvantaged youth, I find that the reform movement’s rhetoric constructs the spaces in which these youth live as discrete entities, isolatable from broader social structures of exploitation and thus entirely accountable for the intensity with which their inhabitants suffer material neglect and oppression.

Paper B

Paper B, titled “Human capital and uneven development,” traces the “human capital” concept from its development in the late 1950s through to its present usage. The findings in *Paper B* represent responses to two questions. First, why haven’t the unprecedented increases and diffusion of educational attainment across demographic groups led to greater economic equity, as human capital theory would predict? Second, what has prevented the education reform movement from recognizing or even acknowledging the discrepancy between human capital theory’s predictions and empirical data?

The first set of texts analyzed in *Paper B* are foundational pieces by the academic economists who first established the idea of “human capital” in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This analysis summarizes the stimulus for the concept’s development, the questions it was meant to help its developers answer, the assumptions that underlie it, and the ideological stakes that

some of its early developers attached to it being seen as more than a construct. The second set of texts analyzed in *Paper B* are academic articles applying the human capital concept to the study of urban and regional economic development. I suggest that together, the early work on human capital and its appropriation by (acritical) urban/regional development theorists constitute a narrative according to which more and better education is the most effective solution to poverty, economic inequality, and regional underdevelopment.

The third section of the paper documents the uptake of this narrative by an emergent faction within the Democratic party in the early 1990s, and its subsequent use as rationalization for the party's changing policy priorities and objectives from that point forward. The third and final set of texts analyzed in *Paper B*, therefore, are transcripts of campaign speeches, think tank documents, and newspaper and magazine articles through which this rationalization was developed by party apparatchiks, and then broadcast to the electorate.

In response to its first question, *Paper B* argues that the human capital narrative is hamstrung by its assumptions that capital and labor meet on a level playing field, and that funneling resources to a given place is equivalent to providing resources to its residents. In response to the second question, *Paper B* argues that the human capital narrative persists despite its divergence from empirical reality because it is consistent with the consensus on appropriate forms of economic governance that has been forged between the U.S.'s two major political parties since the late 1970s.

Paper C

Paper C, titled "The Apologetic Geographies of U.S. Education Reform," asks why the political and business elite have chosen to funnel their social justice rhetoric and policymaking efforts through a discourse of education reform, and, more specifically, what the discursive

content of their call for reform suggests about the political motives of the education reform movement. Critical discourse analysis was performed on transcripts of public comments made by elected officials and government bureaucrats, education reform documentaries funded by large education reform philanthropists, newspaper and magazine articles about the state of public education in the U.S., pro-reform editorials in major newspapers, think tank reports on the state of public education in the U.S. with regard to the geopolitical and geoeconomic interests of the U.S., and reports on the same topic commissioned by or published by the U.S. government.

Based on my analysis of these texts, *Paper C* demonstrates that the education reform movement's discursive tactics have been centered on the claim that, by failing to ensure sustained national (macro)economic growth and so-called national security, the public school system bears responsibility for the economic and corporeal vulnerabilities experienced by a large and growing share of the U.S. population. *Paper C* then argues that this claim relies on a pair of plainly false assumptions, namely, that aggregated economic growth necessarily leads to broadly shared income increases, and that the state's pursuit of national security ensures protection from harm for those marginalized and/or oppressed under the prevailing set of social arrangements. In short, *Paper C* finds that by directing its apologies to the 'national' geopolitical entity' and 'national' economy, the reform movement has lent legitimacy to forms of state governance that enrich the already wealthy and entrench uneven distributions of power and security, while strategically sidestepping recognition of the many inequities and injustices that a finer-grained examination of social life would reveal.

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APPENDIX A

Education Reform as Ascriptive Emplacement

To be submitted to *Critical Education*

By Jared Powell

Abstract

By attributing the persistence of race- and class-based inequalities to the ineffectiveness of U.S. public schools, the education reform movement in the U.S. has sought to position itself as a key contributor in the struggle for social justice. Yet prominent affiliates of the education reform movement seem equally, if not more, committed to educational policies and pedagogical practices that are effectively, and in many cases advisedly, responsible for race- and class-based educational inequalities. In this paper, I suggest that this apparent discrepancy is a product of the reform movement's tacit embrace of the 'culture of poverty thesis,' which directs culpability for poverty and widespread insecurity away from the institutions and social relations through which the political-economic elite maintain their hegemony, to the mentality and behavior of the poor and insecure themselves. I argue that the reform movement has propagated this narrative using rhetoric that constructs the homes and classrooms of low-income, non-white students as socio-spatially discrete entities through which social pathologies are generated and spread in order to absolve inequitable social structures from culpability for poverty and inequality.

Introduction

Over the last three years (2014-2016), thousands of demonstrators have taken to the streets in cities across the U.S. in response to a string of killings of unarmed black men and women at the hands of the police¹, and the inability of the legal system to ensure that the individuals guilty of such actions are consistently held accountable for them (Kindy & Kelly, 2015). The Black Lives Matter movement, which grew out of these nationwide protest actions, has called for, among other things, community oversight of police forces, stricter limits on what is considered a 'justifiable' use of force by police officers, independent investigations of

allegations of police misconduct, and the demilitarization of urban police departments (www.joincampaignzero.org). Under pressure from Black Lives Matter and like-minded individuals and groups, several Democratic entrants into the 2016 presidential race released proposals describing how they would seek to meet these demands, if elected (ibid). Remarkably, even the Police Executive Research Forum (2015), an organization whose membership is drawn from the leadership of the U.S.'s largest police departments, has responded to the spike in public attention to police violence by releasing a report acknowledging that situational “de-escalation” training is inadequate in departments across the country, and that “police culture” needs to be changed in order to ensure that officers value “the sanctity of *all* human life” (p. 4, emphasis original).

Prominent education reformers and a number of conservative public figures have, by contrast, responded to these demonstrations by suggesting that a better approach would be to improve the moral and intellectual condition of the individuals belonging to the demographics typically subjected to police violence. Former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, for example, told a radio talk-show audience in December of 2014 that:

[t]he energy that [Al] Sharpton and everybody else is spending protesting against police would save a lot more black lives if it would start talking about black education, if it started talking about the family situation in the black neighborhoods” (Strauss, 2014).

Following the death of Freddie Gray – whose fatal injuries were sustained while in the custody of the Baltimore police, almost certainly as a result of rough treatment by the officers transporting him to the station – *New York Times* columnist David Brooks used a column to suggest that Gray wouldn’t have put himself in a position to be brutalized by the police if he had grown up in a different neighborhood:

Individuals [who grow up in neighborhoods like Gray's] are left without the norms that middle-class people take for granted. It is phenomenally hard for young people in such circumstances to guide themselves. Yes, jobs are necessary, but if you live in a neighborhood, as Gray did, where half the high school students don't bother to show up for school on a given day, then the problems go deeper. (Brooks, 2015).

In response to the mass demonstrations in Baltimore following Gray's death, Jeanne Allen, founder of the Center for Education Reform, took to social media, announcing to her Twitter followers that: "Baltimore riots and community dysfunction remind us that we must fix schools and make #edreform a reality 4 all. #Charterschools save cities".²

Using the unrest in Baltimore to promote the SEED charter school chain, Thomas Freidman (2015) recounted a trip to one particular school's graduation ceremony at the behest of his wife, who is chairperson of the foundation that funds the chain's parent organization. After describing the ways that SEED schools prepare their students for success in life by providing them with various forms of support they supposedly don't receive at home, Friedman approvingly quoted then Secretary of Education Arne Duncan as saying:

I went to Baltimore and talked to teachers after the riots. [...] The number of kids living with no family member is stunning. But who is there 24/7? The gangs. At a certain point, you need love and structure, and either traditional societal institutions provide that or somebody else does. We get outcompeted by the gangs, who are there every day on those corners. (Friedman, 2015)

Implied in each of the comments cited here is the notion that the protestors in Baltimore (and elsewhere) are not acting on a legitimate grievance, having missed the forest for the trees. According to the narrative that has coalesced around statements like these, the problem is not

structural racism or police violence, but a pathological irresponsibility that is supposedly pervasive in the communities where those most frequently exposed to aggressive policing reside (exemplified by their problematic “family situation,” their inability to “guide themselves,” generalized “community dysfunction,” and their lack of “love and structure”).

This narrative aligns neatly with the longstanding tendency in the U.S. for those occupying positions of power to attribute the reproduction of social injustice to the conduct and beliefs of those who are its victims (Katz, 1995). According to historian Alice O'Connor (2001), one effect of this tendency – which underlies what is often referred to as the ‘culture of poverty thesis’ – has been to transform social class from an economic to a psychological category in popular discourse, the idea being that those unable to live comfortably and securely in a society as affluent as the U.S. must simply have the wrong mindset. ‘Correcting’ this mindset in individuals and transforming the social contexts from which it allegedly emerges has long been a popular strategy for addressing inequality and injustice among the U.S.’s largest philanthropic organizations, influential think tanks, and government institutions (Katz, 1995; O'Connor, 2001).

Spanning these spheres, the contemporary education reform movement has been a key player in the propagation of ‘culture of poverty’-infused explanations for persistent social problems, and in the promotion a corresponding set of pedagogical ‘cures’ for students thought to be afflicted with counterproductive mentalities. Having secured the legitimacy of its narrative with a majority of the public (Richardson & Bushaw, 2015), the contemporary education reform movement has moved aggressively into the promotion of a set of educational policy and procedural changes that its membership contends will improve the effectiveness of the U.S.’s public schools. These changes are primarily directed at schools serving mostly low-income, black, and Hispanic students, whose relegation to the wrong end of the educational “achievement

gap” is, according to reformers, the primary reason for the political and economic marginalization of these groups in society more generally.

Attributing the persistence of race- and class-based inequalities to the ineffectiveness of U.S. public schools in this way has been a key element in the reform movement’s effort to market its project as vital to the wider cause of social justice. Prominent affiliates and supporters of the reform movement often describe education reform as the single most important “civil rights issue” facing the U.S. today (e.g. Cruz, 2015; Duncan, 2011; 2013; 2013b; Johnson, 2014; McCain, 2008; see also Gabriel, 2013; Glyn, 2012; Miners, 2009; Turque, 2008). This tactic seems to have worked. A recent national poll indicates that while the adoption of national curricular standards and the frequent use of standardized testing – cornerstones of the education reform movement’s policy agenda – are unpopular among the American public overall, they are most popular among black and Hispanic respondents (Richardson & Bushaw, 2015, p. 6-9; 12-13). Yet in spite of their oft-stated commitment to civil rights, prominent affiliates of the education reform movement are equally committed to educational policies and pedagogical practices that are effectively, and in many cases advisedly, responsible for many of these race- and class-based educational inequalities. Pedagogical rigidity, student passivity, teaching labor precarity, and the constant threat of even deeper budget cuts (euphemized by reformers as ‘setting consistent standards,’ ‘developing character,’ ‘removing ineffective teachers,’ and ‘ensuring accountability,’ respectively) at schools in low-income neighborhoods are, in fact, promoted by reformers as the most promising means of wringing higher standardized test scores out of disadvantaged youth.

Drawing on Katz’s theorization of “childhood as spectacle” (2008), and specifically of the notion that under neoliberalism children have been positioned a risk to be managed, I argue

in this paper that this discrepancy is a product of the desire among the elite leadership of the education reform movement to direct culpability for poverty and widespread insecurity away from the institutions and social relations through which they maintain their hegemony, to the mentality and behavior of the poor and insecure themselves. I begin by documenting the reform movement's propagation of narratives that construct two artificially bounded spaces from which the social pathologies supposedly preventing low-income, black, and Hispanic students from closing the academic 'achievement gap' with their white peers emerge and spread, using an approach Wainwright has labeled 'spacing' (2008). I show that these narratives have tended to isolate two such socially pathogenic spaces in particular – what I will call the Troubled Home and the Chaotic Classroom – as targets for reformist intervention. After tracing the intellectual and discursive lineage of these imagined spaces, I describe the educational practices that have been held up by the reform movement as cures for the social problems that are said to proliferate in each.

The Troubled Home

Constructing the space: from Moynihan to contemporary paternalism

In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan released a copy of his report on 'race relations' in the U.S., titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," to his colleagues at the U.S. Department of Labor where he was serving as Assistant Secretary. Combining a seemingly earnest desire to right history's wrongs with a countervailing patriarchal gender norm determinism, Moynihan sought to show that the "deterioration" of the black family structure – meaning the lack of dominant male providers and the consequent rise of female headed households – was responsible for a variety of political-economic imbalances between blacks and whites. Though "The Negro Family" was soon criticized as racist in the media (Massey &

Sampson, 2009), the early pages of the report were dedicated to attributing the cause of this “deterioration” to the mistreatment of African Americans by whites, both before and after the Civil War. For example, Moynihan argued that the many forms of violence and humiliation visited upon black men that were designed to maintain a racial hierarchy under slavery and during the Jim Crow era had prevented African-American fathers from serving as strong, proud role models for their male offspring. Moynihan also pointed out that the capitalist economy required black men to compete for scarce living-wage jobs with white men privileged by racist hiring preferences, making white-dominated labor markets at least partially responsible for pushing black families into poverty and (more importantly for Moynihan) forcing women into the workforce to supplement the black family’s income. In short, the ultimate causes of the political and economic inequity between blacks and whites, according to Moynihan, was, in fact, racism.

Turning away from racism itself, however, Moynihan proceeded in the remainder of the report to attribute the persistence of social and economic inequity beyond Jim Crow to a set of intervening phenomena he collectively dubbed the “tangle of pathology”: out-of-wedlock births, female headed households, high divorce rates, and “welfare dependency”. According to Moynihan, this tangle had, by the 1960s, become “capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world.” That is, while whites may have created the conditions for the “breakdown” of the black family, the psychological and behavioral tendencies thus inspired took root in black culture and thereby became self-sustaining. As one of the earliest discursive wedges driven between what might be called ‘safety net’ liberalism and ‘up-by-your-bootstraps’ liberalism, “The Negro Family” suggested that because these counterproductive tendencies had become an inherent characteristic of black families, federal legislation and institutions designed

to ensure equality of opportunity (e.g. the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964) would not be enough to ensure the upward mobility of most African-Americans. The “tangle of pathology” itself would need to be addressed through government correctives targeting black family life.

Moynihan stated early in the report that “[t]he family is the basic social unit of American life; it is the basic socializing unit. By and large, adult conduct in society is learned as a child.” Without the stability, security, and example offered by living in a household led by an archetypical provider-father and subordinate carer-mother, therefore, African-American children were unlikely to develop the intellectual capacity, morals, and habits that would allow them to eventually compete with their white peers in the labor market. What was needed, then, were federal programs that would “strengthen the Negro family so as to enable it to raise and support its members as do other [i.e. white] families.” No specific guidance was offered toward that end, but the idea that African-Americans were responsible for their own marginalization resonated with a durably prejudiced and self-exculpatory white public, first exposed to the contents of “The Negro Family” by the press just weeks before the racially polarizing Watts Riots in Los Angeles. As a result, the ‘Moynihan Report’ established itself as the inspiration for a variety of attempts to redirect responsibility for inequality and insecurity onto the lifestyles of the demographics that suffer from them.

One prominent example of the Moynihan Report’s legacy is the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), more commonly referred to as “welfare reform,” signed into law by Bill Clinton in 1996. With the goal of “ending recipients’ dependence on government benefits” (Congressional Budget Office, 2015, p. 1) and driving

them into the workforce, PRWORA placed a hard cap on federal welfare spending irrespective of inflation (effectively lowering certain forms of federal welfare spending each year), put limits on how long families could receive cash assistance from the government, gave state governments the flexibility to use federal entitlement monies to provide employment-related services in place of cash assistance, required those seeking assistance to be engaged in work-related activities, and required states to penalize families that engaged in certain behaviors (e.g. drug use, out-of-wedlock childbearing and childrearing). Underlying the PRWORA was the assumption that poverty was attributable to the unwillingness of the poor to live responsibly and take available jobs. For example, Lawrence Mead, whose academic and think tank writings on public policy provided an intellectual veneer for welfare reform in the 1990s³, described the need for PRWORA to an interviewer in this way:

I disagree with the view, held by most experts, that poverty is due to a lack of opportunity. Nor are the poor individually to blame. Rather, order has broken down in poor areas, so poor adults no longer reliably do what it takes to avoid poverty—work, obey the law, acquire a sound education, and so forth. (Kosar, 2006, p. 795)

Like Moynihan, Mead has conceded that racism and economic instability have had profound effects on those living in low-income, black, and Hispanic households. But according to Mead's other writings, these structural impediments to equality are effectively irrelevant now that generalized irresponsibility and aversion to waged work have become self-sustaining in and endogenous to disadvantaged communities (Mead, 2010). For Mead, "[t]he traditional liberal view that discrimination by whites explains black inequality is rebuked by the persistence of serious black poverty in a society without formal discrimination" (Mead, 1997, p. 22). With "formal" (legal?) racist discrimination out of the way, the only thing left to do is transform the

counterproductive habits and mentalities prevailing in poor and minority communities. To this end, Mead has advocated a “paternalist” approach to poverty reduction that “questions the assumption of individual efficacy” (Mead, 1997, p. 23) and therefore centers on “control[ling] the lifestyle of the poor” (ibid, p. 6) in exchange for their receipt of benefits. In a passage that seems lifted from Orwell’s *1984*, Mead sums up his social philosophy thusly: “to live effectively, people need personal restraint to achieve their own long-run goals. In this sense, obligation is the precondition of freedom. Those who would be free must first be bound” (Mead, 1997, p. 23).

Working under a Democratic administration, Moynihan’s report helped legitimize inclusion of the ‘culture of poverty thesis’ into mainstream liberal thought. The conservative refraction of Moynihan’s message over the last few decades by Mead and others has effectively done away with what contextual explanations for inequality “The Negro Family” allowed, and has thereby lent credence to the notion that the black and/or poor family can be analyzed in isolation from the broader social world and addressed accordingly. By focusing on the behavior of the non-white and poor, and the divergence of their family dynamics from an imagined ‘middle-class,’ patriarchal-heterosexual norm, Moynihan, Mead, and their disciples have cast the alleged dysfunctionality of poor, black, and/or Hispanic communities as originating in the poor, black, and/or Hispanic household. In other words, Moynihan and Mead have contributed to the construction of the subaltern home as a socially pathogenic space, and as the appropriate target for poverty reduction efforts.

The media has provided journalists of all perspectives (within the window of acceptable discourse, obviously) ample space to defend and promote this idea. Oren Cass of the conservative Manhattan Institute, for example, has argued that income inequality in the U.S. “emerges not from changing economic conditions at the top but rather from a catastrophic social

collapse at the bottom” where “strong families and tightly knit communities that endow children with the discipline and responsibility they need to navigate life” are lacking (Cass, 2015).

Drawing on a similar politics, *Washington Post* columnist and Fox News contributor George Will has suggested that contemporary left/liberal criticisms of Moynihan’s report are merely reflections of a problematic tendency for ‘political correctness’ to be prioritized over candid assessments of social reality in the U.S., and that the obvious, if unpopular, solution to income inequality would be to introduce the poor to the culture of poverty’s antithesis, “the culture of work” (Will, 2014)⁴. In the *Wall Street Journal*, Jason Riley lauded Moynihan for attempting to start “an honest conversation about family breakdown and black pathology,” and the role these problems have played in social inequity, even if “most liberals” have since refused to join it (Riley, 2015).

Ironically, perhaps, a number of prominent journalists writing for reputedly liberal outlets actually agree with Riley’s last point. In a piece titled “When Liberals Blew It,” Nicholas Kristof (2015) of the *New York Times* argued that those to the left-of-center made a “historic mistake” rejecting Moynihan’s conclusions and distancing themselves from research on the connection between family structure and poverty. After noting that poverty is higher in single-parent households than dual parent households because the former only have one income earner, Kristof concluded that 21st century poverty reduction ought to begin with programs meant to encourage the formation of “stable families” (apparently forgetting that Moynihan’s ideal family would have also had only one wage earner: the “strong father figure”). Jonathan Chait of *New York Magazine* has likewise chastened his fellow liberals for disavowing Moynihan and the ‘culture of poverty’ thesis. In a back-and-forth with Ta-Nahisi Coates of *The Atlantic*, Chait likened structural racism and its effects on minorities to a basketball game with biased

officiating, and argued that if he were coaching the team disadvantaged by the referees' unfair calls, he would encourage his players to ignore it, lest they become discouraged and stop giving a full effort, or worse, "lash out" (Chait, 2014a). Drawing on Moynihan's message, Chait's hypothetical was meant to demonstrate that the point of the 'culture of poverty' thesis is not to deny that historically-rooted inequities exist but rather to encourage those on the wrong end of biased social structures to focus on things that are within their control, namely, their own behavior. In another essay in the same conversation, Chait sought to counter Coates's contention that racism, not black inadequacy, is to blame for racialized inequity by explaining that:

People are the products of their environment. Environments are amenable to public policy. Some of the most successful anti-poverty initiatives, like the Harlem Children's Zone or the KIPP schools, are designed around the premise that children raised in concentrated poverty need to be taught middle class norms. (Chait, 2014b)

Here Chait draws an imaginary (and unspecified) line between the "environment" that poor people inhabit and the wider social world, which is – presumably – less "amenable to public policy". Unfortunately, Chait does not substantiate this claim with statistics on how many KIPP students have escaped poverty, or by explaining how the introduction of "middle class norms" to the "environments" inhabited by of the poor would translate into poverty reduction, or by explaining why this is more feasible than a broadly redistributive approach would be. But an analysis of the pedagogical strategies employed at the type of schools he mentions – those that make discipline an explicit, rather than 'invisible'⁵ part of their curriculum – provides clues as to why this would seem a plausible proposition among the elite.

Advocating a Cure: Engineered Optimism

The pedagogical praxis at the Harlem Children's Zone, those that are part of the KIPP ('Knowledge is Power Program') chain of charter schools, and others with a similar educational philosophy, draws in significant ways from academic research on 'positive psychology,' a branch of the larger discipline of psychology that took shape as such in the late 1990s. The impetus for the development of positive psychology came from Martin Seligman, whose earlier work had demonstrated a tendency for dogs given electric shocks while immobilized to eventually reach a state in which they no longer attempted to move away from the source of their suffering, even after being freed from the apparatus that restricted their movement. Seligman labeled this response "learned helplessness," and found that the only successful way to cure it was to forcibly show the traumatized dogs that their newly available freedom of movement would in fact allow them to end their suffering, by literally dragging the animals to a point out of range of the mechanism delivering the shock (Seligman, 1972⁶).⁷

Seligman became president of the American Psychological Association in 1998 and, as he tells it, became convinced that psychologists needed to stop focusing on mental disorders and transform their discipline from a "victimology" to one centered on identifying and nurturing positive experiences, character traits, and emotions – after being told by his daughter one day to stop sulking (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). If torturing animals had taught Seligman how to reduce living beings to a state of "learned helplessness," he now wanted the discipline of psychology to do the opposite: develop the psychological tools with which individuals could be dragged out of despondency and coaxed into a state of "learned optimism" (Seligman, 2005). The goal of this 'positive' brand of psychology would be to make "normal people stronger and more productive" (p. 8) and "show what actions lead to well-being, positive individuals, and

thriving communities” (ibid, p. 5). Given its emphases on optimism, perseverance, and productivity – explicitly at the expense of clear-eyed evaluation – funders from the business community and government soon flocked to the cause of positive psychology, allowing research on the subject to proliferate, and new handbook⁸, measurement tools⁹, research clusters¹⁰, an academic journal¹¹ and a university research center¹² to be created in short order (Seligman et al, 2005).

One of Seligman’s graduate student mentees at the University of Pennsylvania was Angela Duckworth, who left teaching at the K-12 level to pursue a PhD in psychology after becoming convinced that the difficulties poor and minority children seemed to be having grasping basic concepts were attributable to their lack of “character” (Hartnett, 2012). In their first co-authored paper, Duckworth and Seligman (2005) compared the grades, test scores, and attendance records of students whose responses to questionnaires suggested that they were “highly self-disciplined” to those of students with high IQs at an “academically competitive school,” and found that self-discipline had a greater positive impact on school performance than IQ. From this, they concluded that the reverse was also likely true: students performing poorly in school were probably just suffering from a lack of self-discipline (ibid).

In 2007, Duckworth joined Seligman on the faculty of the Psychology Department at the University of Pennsylvania (Hartnett, 2012) and published the first of what are now a handful of papers on the construct she and her coauthors named “grit,” defined in the piece as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth et al, 2007, p. 1087). In accordance with Seligman’s earlier call for psychology to determine which psychological traits produce positive outcomes for individuals, the authors of this article sought to determine whether the ‘non-cognitive’ traits included within their grit construct – focus, determination, diligence, work ethic,

perseverance – predicted “success.” To this end, the authors created a series of 12 statements (e.g. “I finish whatever I begin,” “I am a hard worker,” “Setbacks don’t discourage me”) that research subjects were then asked to agree or disagree with using a Likert Scale. Subject responses to these statements were then used to calculate a composite grit score. In an eclectic series of experiments, the authors regressed case-specific outcomes in a variety of circumstances (final level of educational attainment for a sample of adults, retention through the first summer of training at the United States Military Academy, placing at the 2005 Scripps National Spelling Bee) against their subjects’ levels of grit, finding that the effect of grit on the variance in case-specific levels of achievement ranged from 1.4% to 6.3% (see Table 3, p. 1099). Nevertheless, the authors concluded from this that grit was, indeed, an important predictor of success.

When building a case for their study of grit’s influence on success through a summary of the existing literature on the relationship between talent, personality, and achievement, Duckworth and her co-authors stated openly that they would not be considering “situational factors and social and cultural variables that influence achievement” (2007, p. 1088). This ad/omission exemplifies the key thread running from positive psychology to grit: the individualization of responsibility for one’s circumstances. Central to both research streams is the notion that one avoids failure by simply identifying and nurturing their positive personal traits, which operate as such largely independent of social context. Since the original paper introducing the grit construct was published in 2007, Duckworth has attempted to establish a causal link between grit and successful teaching (Duckworth et al, 2009), higher report card grades (Duckworth et al, 2012), and a willingness to employ effective study habits (Duckworth et al, 2011). In each case study, context is held constant or left absent from the discussion of the findings, such that progress and improvement are rendered as solitary accomplishments.

Given the extent to which academic achievement and failure are individualized in the U.S. (grades, test scores, scholarships, diplomas, etc.), and the tendency for elites to sideline contextual explanations of educational disparities¹³, it is unsurprising that Duckworth has been welcomed into the education reform movement, rewarded for her work by philanthropic foundations, and treated with deference as an educational expert in the media. In 2012, Duckworth was invited to Washington DC by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to offer policy recommendations. Though generally supportive of standardized testing, Duckworth explained to Duncan that existing tests focused too much on the measurement of conventional academic knowledge and skills. Grit, self-control, and other “non-cognitive” measures of ability, Duckworth argued, should be tested as well (Hartnett, 2012). A year later, Arne Duncan gave a speech urging charter school operators to focus greater attention on developing mechanisms and metrics with which “non-cognitive” skills can be taught and measured (Duncan, 2013a), and the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Technology published a report on how technology could and should be used to measure ‘non-cognitive’ skills and dispositions, such as “grit, tenacity, and perseverance” in students (Office of Educational Technology, 2013). Additionally, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a Congressionally mandated quadrennial appraisal of how well 4th, 8th, and 12th graders in the U.S. are absorbing course content in a variety of subjects, will likely add measures of ‘grit’ and “desire for learning” to its metrics by 2017 (Sparks, 2015).

Duckworth has received grants from the Templeton Foundation to develop methods of quantifying self-control in children, and from the Gates Foundation to quantify the personality traits that separate college graduates from college dropouts (Hartnett, 2012). In 2013 Duckworth became a Fellow at the MacArthur Foundation, which describes the significance of her work as

“providing an alternative to the focus on cognitive skills now dominant in American education practice” (see <https://www.macfound.org/fellows/889/>). Funding from the Walton Family Foundation has supported Duckworth’s Character Lab (Walton Family Foundation, 2015), a non-profit organization she co-founded to produce research on teaching ‘non-cognitive’ skills, and to turn this research into curricular and pedagogical tools for teachers and schools.

Public exposure for the research funded by these grants and at the Character Lab has been provided by a variety of media outlets. Since giving a TED Talk on self-control and grit in 2013, Duckworth has had her research profiled by NPR (Smith, 2014), CNN (Cooper, 2015), *The Washington Post* (Tam, 2013), *Fast Company* (Baer, 2013), *National Geographic* (Del Giudice, 2014; Schleeter, 2013), and in a *New York Times Magazine* article (2011) and bestselling book (2013) by journalist Paul Tough. In May of 2016, Duckworth released her first book, titled *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*.

Duckworth’s influence on educational policy in the U.S. has been expanded through her close collaboration with the KIPP schools, a charter school chain founded in the 1994 by two former Teach for America recruits who, spurred by their shared disdain for conventional teacher preparation and child-centered pedagogical theory, decided to focus on improving educational outcomes for poor and minority students using an approach explicitly organized around a comprehensive set of behavioral expectations and a highly regimented form of standardized test preparation (Mathews, 2009). According to its website, KIPP considers the cultivation of “character” and the development of positive mindsets as key to both. With Duckworth’s guidance, and “[g]rounded in the research of Dr. Martin Seligman,” KIPP has established a set of personality traits that supposedly correlate with the leading of “engaged, happy and successful lives” – zest, grit, optimism, self-control, gratitude, social intelligence, and curiosity – as the foci

of its operation¹⁴. To track the development of these traits in KIPP students, Duckworth's Character Lab developed Character Growth Cards, to be used alongside their regular report cards, meant to indicate the frequency with which individual students have demonstrated each of the seven character strengths listed above in a given quarter.

The use of what KIPP calls “dual-purpose instruction” – the imposition of ‘positive’ mindsets and the passive absorption of state-sanctioned knowledge alongside the teaching of conventional academic content – is not limited to KIPP schools. The Democracy Prep chain of charter schools, for example, has oriented its pedagogy around the goal of addressing the despondency that leads individuals from low-income and/or minority families to vote less often and have less trust in the government than their affluent/white counterparts. According to Lautzenheiser & Kelly, the schools that make up the Democracy Prep network “prioritize closing this civic gap with the same force as closing the traditional student achievement gaps in reading and math” (2013, p. 3). To do so, the Democracy Prep experience is built around its behavioral ‘DREAM’ values: Discipline, Respect, Enthusiasm, Accountability, and Maturity (ibid, p. 4). Like Democracy Prep, schools in the National Heritage Academies (NHA) network (the U.S.’s second largest chain of charter schools after KIPP) provide students with a “moral education imbued with traditional values such as love of country and family,” and use a curriculum that is meant to prepare students for a very specific type of active citizenship by instilling a very narrowly defined sense of civic duty (Jacobs, 2013, p. 1). While social studies exercises used at NHA associate serving in the military, voting, and writing letters to the editor with personal virtue and legitimate civic participation, its “traditional, adults-in-charge structure” and emphasis on “respect and responsibility” were meant to actively discourage forms of activism that question American exceptionalism, or challenge authority (ibid, p. 9).

The United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) charter network in Chicago frames its highly disciplinary approach to education as a means of integrating its largely Hispanic student body and their families into the Chicago-area, and American, communities. UNO's founder, Juan Rangel, looks on the early history of public education systems in the U.S., when the assimilation and 'Americanization' of European migrants were considered key objectives of schooling, as a model on which all schools serving immigrant-dense communities should be based. In contrast with the view that Hispanic Americans constitute a "victimized community in need of social justice," Rangel's schools seek to promote a view of the U.S. that is "worthy of optimistic, patriotic gratitude" (Feith, 2013, p. 2). For that reason, like the NHA schools, UNO emphasizes the virtue of participating in electoral democracy explicitly at the expense of more direct forms of democracy. In Rangel's words, "[t]he greatest protest action in this country is your right to vote" (ibid p. 7-8)¹⁵.

'Positive' Pedagogy and Grit: Manufactured Acquiescence

The growing focus within the education reform movement on grit and 'character' in schools serving low-income, black, and Hispanic students is categorically unjust.¹⁶ For one thing, asking poor, black, and/or Hispanic children to superimpose a set of extrinsically engineered emotions over those that manifest organically from their interaction with an unequal world is cruel, given the very real and thoroughly documented material and psychological harm poverty and racism do to people. The effort to cast the psychological transformation of poor/minority children as the solution to societal inequity ignores the devastating neurological effects that poverty has likely already had on these children by the time they arrive for their first day at KIPP, Democracy Prep, NHA, UNO, or other similarly oriented schools. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the stress associated with living in poverty, when

experienced as a young child, significantly disrupts the development of the nervous, cardiovascular, and immune systems. Malformation of these vital systems can create physical, psychological, and intellectual health issues that last well into adulthood (Shonkoff & Garner, 2011), even after the source of stress has been removed (Liston et al, 2008). Partly as a result of this, poverty has a greater impact on academic achievement than in-school factors such as teacher quality or school culture (Berliner, 2013), and ‘achievement gap’ between wealthy and poor students has become larger than that between white and non-white students (Reardon, 2011). These trends strongly suggest that the deficiencies leading to the ‘achievement gap’ are fundamentally material, not psychological or behavioral, in nature.

Second, though the individuals responsible for the rising popularity of psychological-conditioning-as-pedagogy in schools attended mostly by low-income and/or minority students have had no trouble securing funding and support from wealthy benefactors and powerful institutional leaders to that end, there is no discernable movement by these benefactors to have the pedagogies used at schools attended by their own children re-worked around test preparation and Panglossianism.¹⁷ Instead, the elites at the head of the education reform movement seem to have decided that faulty mindsets and behaviors are exclusive to black, Hispanic, and low-income communities, and that these deficiencies alone are responsible for the marginalization of these groups in society more generally despite evidence that one’s home/family environment is an extremely poor predictor of one’s academically relevant personality traits (Rimfeld et al, 2016). Following the lead of Moynihan and Mead, education reformers encourage the view that social mobility in the U.S. is lower than it is in almost all of its peer countries (Corak, 2006) not because hierarchy is an inherent feature of the prevailing economic and political systems, but because of the intergenerational transmission of psychological and behavioral pathologies in

poor, black, and/or Hispanic households. Put differently, addressing inequality with grit and character education is popular among the elite because it accords with explanations of injustice that locate the causes of marginalization and oppression within the spaces occupied by the marginalized and oppressed themselves.

Third, grit and character based pedagogies, like the broader field of ‘positive psychology’ from which they have emerged, represent an attempt to govern the subjectivity of young people from exploited and marginalized demographics in a manner than legitimizes the very social structures responsible for the reproduction of their exploitation and marginalization (Gagen, 2013). Rather than opening these structures up to scrutiny and/or contestation, pedagogies built around grit and character development seek to condition vulnerable children to willingly participate in the reproduction of unjust social arrangements. ‘Dual-purpose instruction’ and unyielding disciplinary mechanisms pursue student acquiescence at the expense of student agitation, and are therefore closer in nature to counterinsurgency than to enlightenment.¹⁸

The Chaotic Classroom

In the education reform narrative, the psychological re-tooling of poor, black, and Hispanic children described above also requires particular kind of schooling environment. To make this case to the public, the reform movement has relied on the idea – popularized and perpetuated by the entertainment industry and mass media – that the public schools serving students from these demographics often lack effective adult leadership, and a consistent, purposeful set of objectives. The chaos plaguing public schools attended by poor, black, and Hispanic students is a product of two critical perceptions held by the reform movement: that ‘urban’ classrooms tend toward anarchy, and that schools across the country lack a shared sense of purpose and direction.

Constructing the space: pedagogical anarchy in popular film

The 1955 film *Blackboard Jungle* opens with the following block of text:

We, in the United States, are fortunate to have a school system that is a tribute to our communities and to our faith in American youth. Today we are concerned with juvenile delinquency – its causes – and its effects. We are especially concerned when this delinquency boils over into our schools. The scenes and incidents depicted here are fictional. However, we believe that public awareness is a first step toward a remedy for any problem. It is in this spirit and with this faith that *Blackboard Jungle* was produced.

In the film, WWII veteran Richard Dadier (Glenn Ford) returns to civilian life and takes a job teaching English at North Manual (i.e. vocational) High School in an unspecified urban setting, where the students are almost universally unruly and uninterested in learning, and most of the school's faculty have become cynical and seemingly given up as a result. Among Dadier's class of malcontents, two play a special role in the film: Artie West, a white student, and Gregory Miller (Sidney Portier), a black student. At first, neither student is interested at all in what Dadier has to say. But while Mitchell gradually softens his demeanor in response to Dadier's repeated entreaties, West remains resolute in his desire not to cede authority over the classroom, openly mocking Dadier at every chance, making threatening phone calls to Dadier's wife, and eventually coordinating a physical attack on the teacher across the street from the school. One of the police officers who arrives to take a report of the assault suggests that the behavioral problems plaguing Dadier's classroom are attributable to a combination of the fact that many of the school's male students grew up in mother-led households while their fathers were away fighting the war, and the fact that urban life had left these boys with "no family life, no church life, no place to go."

Even after this episode, and despite being courted by a comparatively idyllic school in the suburbs, Dadier decides to remain at North Manual, telling the suburban school's principal "I think I'll take another crack at my jungle." Once back at North, Dadier's discord with West reaches its peak when he and a fellow student confront their teacher in class with a switchblade. The tense stand-off is only resolved once Mitchell, apparently having finally been 'turned,' decides to come Dadier's aid. Several other students, having also been 'turned,' soon join Mitchell, restraining West and removing the knife from his control. The Cold War symbolism of this final scene could not have been more obvious. In the struggle for control over the classroom between its two dominant forces, Dadier's optimism, work ethic, faith in the promise of American ideals, and well-intentioned outreach to the non-Anglo student rescues the latter from the cynicism, nihilism, and skepticism of the 'American dream' characterizing West's worldview. With West literally pinned to the wall by the staff of the classroom's American flag, the heroic Dadier stands victorious over the indifference and chaos that once ruled 'his' classroom, ready to use his newly won leadership as a model on which the rest of North Manual might be reformed.

Thirty years later, James Belushi played the title character in a film telling roughly the same story. In 1987's *The Principal*, Belushi is Rick Latimer, a teacher who, on a bender one night, gets into a fight with his ex-wife's new boyfriend outside of a bar. Expecting to be fired when called before the school board the next day, Latimer finds out instead that he will be punished for his indiscretion by being made principal of the notoriously violent, low-achieving Brandel High. Like Dadier's first day at North Manual, Latimer's first day at Brandel serves as a rude awakening. The students are disrespectful to faculty and clearly uninterested in their studies, the school's beaten down faculty have reached a state of near-total apathy, and the

school itself serves as a marketplace for drugs, the trade in which is dominated by Victor, leader of the school's gang. Naively thinking that a stern warning to the student body will begin to turn things around, Latimer holds an assembly at which he declares there will be "No More!" drugs, tardiness, or violence. The assembly has the opposite effect after Victor enters late, mocks and insults Latimer, and sets off a riot among the students. Undeterred, Latimer develops a relationship with some of Brandel's faculty, its head of security Jake (Lou Gossett, Jr.), and even a former member of Victor's gang. Having won allies among the people of color who preceded him at Brandel, Latimer is soon making progress ridding the school of drug use and truancy. Eventually, however, a series of events leads to a one-on-one confrontation between Victor and Latimer in one of the school's hallways. As a crowd of students gathers to watch what becomes a fistfight, Rick overpowers Victor, who is subsequently taken away by the police. With Victor – who, like West, serves as the embodiment of school-based delinquency – defeated, white savior Latimer has finally liberated the troubled urban school from the worst elements of its indigenous population.

In 1995's *Dangerous Minds*, Michelle Pfeiffer stars as Louanne Johnson, a former Marine who, like Dadier, re-enters civilian life by accepting a job teaching at a rough urban high school¹⁹. Johnson's students, mostly low-income, black and/or Hispanic, initially react to her white skin, slight build, and button down attire with open disrespect, and by refusing to recognize her as an authority figure. Though she at one point shouts to her students that "there are no victims in this classroom!", Johnson is clearly aware that many of her students face difficult circumstances on a daily basis in their lives beyond school walls. Her efforts to encourage and assist a handful of these students outside of school hours and her unique (superficially Freirean) pedagogy eventually help Johnson win over many of even her most

recalcitrant students. The chorus of the movie's theme song, *Gangsta's Paradise* by the rapper Coolio²⁰, reflects the film's premise: "They been spendin' most their lives, livin' in the gangsta's paradise [repeat], We keep spendin' most our lives, livin' in the gangsta's paradise" [repeat]." The message of the film, in other words, is that students at the school Johnson arrives at have spent their lives in a community dominated by, and structured to reproduce, violent and illicit activity. It is only Johnson's mental fortitude and determination, forged during her time in the Marine Corps, that allows her to finally convince her students to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and escape the miasma that is their neighborhood to college and/or the labor market.

The consistent marketability of films telling a story similar to those just summarized (e.g. *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), *Teachers* (1984), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *Lean on Me* (1989), *Only the Strong* (1993), *High School High* (1996), *Coach Carter* (2005), *Freedom Writers* (2007), etc.) suggests that the tropes drawn on in this genre – the prevalence of juvenile delinquency, and the tendency of classrooms in low-income and minority schools towards chaos, in particular – resonate with the movie going public²¹. By repeatedly weaving these tropes into a storyline, these films have also likely helped *create* and reinforce this resonance by providing a public already skeptical of the U.S. public school system (see Richardson & Bushaw, 2015, p. 21) with dramatized instantiations of this perception.²² Just as importantly, though, films falling into this category tend to suggest – while taking varying degrees of dramatic license – the possibility of transforming these schools through 'tough love' and the imposition of 'order.'

Advocating a cure: No Excuses and Zero Tolerance

Beginning in the 1990s, school systems across the country began responding to widespread concerns about delinquency and disorder in the U.S.'s public schools with an approach to school discipline modeled on a theory of criminal justice developed a decade earlier.

In an essay published by *The Atlantic* in 1982 titled “Broken Windows,” criminologist George Kelling and political scientist James Q. Wilson developed this theory around the observation that: “if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken” because “one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs [the window breaker] nothing.” According to Kelling and Wilson, the same principle could be applied to misbehavior more generally. If small nuisances (e.g. loitering, panhandling, noisy congregating, graffiti, etc.) were left unaddressed by the authorities in a given neighborhood, its inhabitants who were prone to antisocial behavior would assume that the violation of norms was tolerated there and thus feel free to escalate their transgressions. The neighborhood’s upstanding citizens who were able to would leave, and those left behind would be forced to hole up inside of their homes to avoid the danger of the street, leaving the neighborhood’s public space open to a full on “criminal invasion.”

To prevent all of this from happening, Kelling and Wilson argued that police in the U.S. needed to be given back the authority to aggressively and unilaterally “maintain order.” Standing in the way, according to the authors, was a shift in public opinion that took place sometime in the 1960s, which caused urban police forces to abandon their proactive orientation and focus instead on reactively investigating and arresting individuals responsible for already-committed crimes. This “unfortunate” change in orientation brought the police “increasingly under the influence of legal restrictions,” ending the era in which civil rights were reserved for “decent folk” and in which police could expect their actions to be judged solely “in terms of its attaining a desired objective.” The public now expected police activity to be in “compliance with appropriate procedures,” meaning that suspected criminals would have to be treated as non-criminals until it was proven otherwise. Only by moving public opinion back in favor of

allowing the police to forcefully and preemptively punish “disreputable” forms of behavior could order in dangerous urban neighborhoods be restored and maintained.

Anticipating their critics, Kelling and Wilson acknowledged potential dangers that providing the police with preemptive authority would create, conceding that they had “no wholly satisfactory answer” to the question of how it could be ensured that the racial/ethnic biases of individual officers would not shape their use of this additional power. But this uncertainty was not enough to back them off of their assertion. Nor was it enough to prevent what came to be known as “broken windows” policing from being adopted by a handful of urban police departments in the years after Kelling and Wilson first published their theory.

The most (in)famous experimentation with “broken windows” has taken place in New York City. Kelling was hired as a consultant by the New York City Transit Authority in the 1980s “in an effort to restore order on the subway” (i.e. eliminate graffiti and turnstile jumping) (Nally, 1997), and William Bratton, New York City’s Police Commissioner during the widely ballyhooed drop in (blue collar) crime that took place under Mayor Rudy Giuliani in the 1990s, has suggested that the “broken windows” theory was the philosophical foundation of his tenure in that role (Toobin, 2013). Inspired by Kelling and Wilson, Bratton aggressively attacked so-called “quality of life” crimes in New York by introducing the CompStat computer system, which tracks and maps criminal activity in order to facilitate the distribution of police personnel and department resources and the comparison of the effectiveness of different precincts, and by encouraging the use of the Stop, Question, and Frisk procedure (“stop and frisk”), which allows officers to interrogate and search the body of any individual they “reasonably suspect” has been, is, or soon will be, committing a crime.

In a 2015 essay published in the conservative *City Journal*²³, Bratton and Kelling proudly stated that “[s]tarting in 1994, with the election of Rudy Giuliani as mayor and the appointment of Bratton as police commissioner...crime fell further, faster, and for longer than anywhere else in the country,” and that “Broken-Windows style policing was pivotal in achieving these results.” Seeking to rebut the claims made by “police critics” that broken windows policing unfairly targets and violates the rights of minorities and that its deployment across the country is partially responsible for the U.S.’s aberrantly high incarceration rate, Bratton and Kelling cite survey data indicating that New York City’s black and Hispanic residents actually support the ‘broken windows’ approach to ‘maintaining order’ by 19 percentage points, and argue that because ‘broken windows’ has reduced crime, it has, by extension, *reduced* incarceration (Bratton & Kelling, 2015).

Yet, setting public opinion aside, it has been demonstrated statistically that ‘broken windows’ policing does indeed disproportionately target New York’s black and Hispanic residents, even after controlling for race-specific crime rates (Gelman et al, 2007). Further, significant doubts have been cast over the assumption that ‘broken windows’ policing actually caused the drop in crime in New York City in the 1990s. In an article in the *University of Chicago Law Review*, Bernard Harcourt and Jens Ludwig have pointed out that the New York City police precincts that saw the largest decreases in crime in the 1990s were also those that saw the largest *increases* in crime during the crack cocaine epidemic that plagued many major American cities in the previous decade, suggesting that crime rates in these precincts may have simply reverted to the mean in the 1990s as the prevalence of the crack and the violence associated with its distribution and usage receded (Harcourt & Ludwig, 2006). To demonstrate the weaknesses of the statistical analyses claiming to show a causal link between ‘broken

windows’ and the decline in crime in the 1990s, Harcourt and Ludwig show that New York City’s homicide rates also correlate, significantly and consistently since the 1970s, with the number of World Series championships accumulated by the New York Yankees over that period. Claims of a causal relationship between ‘broken windows’ police tactics and crime rates are further undercut by crime data published by the FBI in 2009, which indicate that both violent crime and property crime declined significantly across the U.S. as a whole in the 1990s (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009). Perhaps most damaging to the ‘broken windows’ advocates argument, the large drop in crime experienced by New York City in the 1990s was also enjoyed by cities that did not use any form of broken windows policing.

Nevertheless, the evidential ambiguity surrounding broken windows policing has been trumped by ideological fealty to the notion that non-conformity must be severely punished. Because the ‘broken windows’ theory accords with explanations of social problems that obscure the violence of capitalism, racism, and state power, the uncertainty with regard to the actual effectiveness of ‘broken windows,’ and clear evidence of its racially biased implementation, have been disregarded by those in the government and media who continue to treat it as a clear and unmitigated success story. The continued esteem with which the elite regard the ‘broken windows’ theory has allowed its central tenets – the imposition of order through swift and harsh punishment for even slight divergence from protocol – to be translated into a means of addressing the pedagogical anarchy perceived to be plaguing schools serving mostly low-income black and Hispanic students.

Many of the same charter school chains that seek to impose ‘positive’ mindsets and productive behaviors on their students also employ so-called “zero tolerance” disciplinary procedures designed to enforce student docility (Simmons, 2010). “Zero tolerance” schools

closely and nearly continuously monitor student behavior, and levy punishments for even minor divergence from strict rules of communication and bodily comportment (Goodman, 2013). For example, in an application submitted to the New York State Education Board to open a new school in Harlem, an administrator for the Democracy Prep charter school chain boasted that the new school would “adhere to a broken windows approach to school discipline” (Andrew, 2011, p. 15), meaning its faculty and staff would “focus relentlessly on appropriate consequences for small issues in order to ensure that more significant negative behaviors [would be] unlikely to occur” (ibid, p. 16). Similarly, the website of the Achievement First charter school chain states that unlike “many urban schools” where faculty and staff “pick their battles,” it bases its own approach around the ““broken windows” theory that even small details can have a significant impact on overall culture” (see www.achievementfirst.org). The normative benchmarks against which individual student behavior at Achievement First are evaluated are spelled out in the chain’s ‘REACH’ values – Respect, Enthusiasm, Achievement, Citizenship, and Hard Work – which are “cultivated and reinforced as explicitly as academics” (ibid). Students attending the KIPP schools are expected at all times to ‘SLANT’ – Sit up, Listen, Ask and answer questions, Nod one’s head, and Track (i.e. maintain eye contact with) the teacher (Levin, 2012). Those who fail to conform to this set of expectations, or who are caught violating other behavioral rules (e.g. daydreaming, engaging in unsanctioned talking, using the bathroom without permission, etc.), can be forced to wear a unique shirt identifying them as being on a “behavioral plan,” denied a chair to sit in, or forced to remain silent for the entire day (Goodman, 2013). As an administrator from Success Academy – another “zero tolerance” charter school chain – put it in a memo to the school’s 4th grade teachers: “there has to be misery felt for the kids who are not doing what is expected of them” (Taylor, 2015).

“Zero tolerance” policies are not limited to charter schools like KIPP, Democracy Prep, or Achievement First. Beginning in the 1990s, conventional public schools in cities throughout the U.S. began to implement “zero tolerance” policies in accordance with newly passed federal laws requiring the suspension or expulsion of students caught bringing drugs or weapons to school (Casella, 2003). Since then, schools serving primarily low-income, black, and/or Hispanic students have taken it upon themselves to expand the range of unsanctioned behaviors that can lead to suspension or expulsion (Kennedy-Lewis, 2014). Strict, comprehensive standards for comportment have been cast as metaphorical ‘windows’ that must not be broken without swift redress at these schools, and, unsurprisingly, black and Hispanic students receive a disproportionate share of school-related disciplinary action. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, black students were suspended and expelled at rates three times higher than their white peers, and were arrested at school at more than twice the rate of white students²⁴ (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). This is partly because schools with a high percentage of low-income students and students of color are more likely to have ‘school resource officers.’ According to Theriot (2009), schools with ‘school resource officers’ tend to have nearly double the rate of student arrests in general, and nearly four times the rate of arrest for subjective, non-violent behavioral infractions (e.g. ‘disorderly conduct’).

Beyond the (at best) questionable morality of subjecting children to “zero tolerance” schooling, it is somewhat ironic that one of the more prominent planks of the contemporary education reform movement’s agenda is one that makes access to schooling increasingly precarious for precisely those students that, the reformers’ rhetorical appeals to the public would suggest, require consistent and intensive schooling if they are to have any chance at upward mobility. Like broken windows policing, the actual efficacy of the program in meeting stated

educational goals appears less important in practice than its consistency with the broader political goal of concentrating responsibility for social problems in the communities that suffer from these problems. More specifically, it seems that the reform movement's oft-stated concern for the wellbeing of disadvantaged students conflicts with, and is outweighed by, its efforts to derive political utility by locating the cause of educational and societal dysfunction within the classrooms occupied by subaltern youth.

Constructing the space: pedagogical laxity and systemic rudderlessness

Over roughly the same period that concerns about lax discipline at U.S. public schools led to the rise of “zero tolerance” policies and procedures, concerns about the lack of academic rigor in U.S. schools (e.g. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Brock et al, 1990) helped give standardized testing a central role in the education reform project. In the 1990s, school systems across the country began adopting procedural mechanisms through which standardized tests could be used to hold schools and teachers “accountable” for their students’ retention of subject matter (Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Lipman, 2004; Ravitch, 2013). But the impetus for this emphasis on school and teacher accountability can be traced back to the middle of the 20th century, when educational policymaking was shaped to some extent by the state’s need to ease the tension between the demands made on it by the business community, and those made on it by the civil rights movement.

As part of a broad response by the federal government to the racist legacy of slavery in the form of Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was intended to guarantee that a set of basic rights and opportunities could not be denied to individuals on the basis of their race, religion, sex, or country of birth. Title IV of the Act mandated the desegregation of public schools, which, it had by then become clear, could not be ensured by the Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in

the *Brown v. Board of Education* case alone. To provide data for a technocratic supplement for the *de jure* elimination of educational segregation, Section 403 under Title IV of the Act required the U.S. Commissioner of Education²⁵ to organize a study and report on “the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public educational institutions at all levels in the United States, its territories and possessions, and the District of Columbia” (Civil Rights Act, 1964). The result was a document published by the National Center for Educational Statistics titled *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, but which came to be known instead as ‘The Coleman Report,’ after its lead author. The stated purpose of the report was to determine: (a) the extent to which U.S. public schools were segregated by race, (b) whether there were significant differences in quality between schools serving mostly white students and those serving mostly minority students, (c) whether educational achievement at schools serving mostly white students varied significantly from those serving mostly minority students, and (d) whether there was a significant relationship between school quality and academic achievement (Coleman et al, 1966).

The authors found that public schools in the U.S. were indeed quite segregated by race, and that black students were the most likely of all racial groups to attend schools lacking adequate supplies of educational materials and well-stocked libraries. Schools attended by black students were also the least likely to offer college preparatory curriculum, and tended to be staffed by teachers “somewhat less able” than those in schools attended by students from other racial categories. While these findings were mostly unsurprising and therefore uncontroversial, the authors’ description of the link between race and academic achievement on the other hand proved contentious, and has influenced subsequent interpretations of the report’s other findings.

Specifically, the report notes that apart from “Oriental Americans,” minorities scored lower on standardized exams than their white peers at every grade level. Making matters worse, the difference between white and minority scores was larger at higher grade levels, suggesting that what came to be known as the ‘achievement gap’ was cumulative over time. Worse still, the authors of the Coleman Report stated that “[f]or most minority groups...and most particularly the Negro, schools provide little opportunity to overcome [their] *initial deficiency*” (Coleman et al, 1966, p. 21, emphasis added). This phrasing has drawn criticism from progressive/anti-racist academics, who have argued that it exemplifies a strand of educational thought that assumes minority youth are inherently inferior to white students, and that this presumed inferiority is the primary obstacle to closing the achievement gap (e.g. Cammarota, 2011). It should be noted, however, that immediately after the line about the ‘initial deficiencies’ of black students, the Coleman Report’s authors attempted to clarify what they meant:

[w]hatever may be the combination of non-school factors – poverty, community attitudes, low educational levels of parents – which *put minority children at a disadvantage* in verbal and nonverbal skills when they enter the first grade, the fact is the schools have not overcome it (Coleman et al, 1966, p. 21, emphasis added).

That is, it’s not that minority children are inherently (biologically/genetically) inferior to white children, but rather they are “put at a disadvantage” by poverty, and what poverty has done to their parents.

But, somewhat ironically, while the report’s treatment of race has been the cause of lasting controversy, very little has been written about the Coleman Report’s presumption that standardized test scores are the metric with which the quality and equitability of the U.S. public education system ought to be judged, and its narrowly vocational sense of what the purpose of

education is²⁶. In a particularly candid passage, the report's authors admit that standardized tests:

...do not measure intelligence, nor attitudes, nor qualities of character. Furthermore, they are not, nor are they intended to be, "culture free." Quite the reverse: they are culture bound. What they measure are the skills which are among the most important in our society for getting a good job and moving up to a better one, and for full participation in an increasingly technical world. (p. 20)

The context in which this excerpt appears makes it clear that the report's authors do not mean this as a critique, but as a normative statement: standardized tests are meant to determine the extent to which public schools in the U.S. have accomplished their essential task of preparing students for the labor market – no more, no less. Legitimizing the notion that public schooling will be equitable when students of all races have become equally prepared for the workforce, and normalizing the validity of standardized tests as tools with which to gauge the country's progress to that end, have arguably been the most influential contributions of the Coleman Report to educational discourse in the U.S. This legacy is obvious, for example, in *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR) (1983), the landmark education reform document authored by a panel of educators, bureaucrats, and businesspeople assembled by Ronald Reagan's first Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell.²⁷ On page 16 of ANAR, it states that:

All, *regardless of race or class or economic status*, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to *secure gainful employment*,

and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself. (ibid, p. 12, emphasis added)

Here the authors of ANAR, like the authors of the Coleman Report, attempted to fuse social justice and a vocational orientation for public schooling by linking the former with universal access to the labor market. Unfortunately, readers of ANAR subsequently discover that “a rising tide of mediocrity” within the public school system had left a growing share of the nation’s youth unprepared for either higher education or work. As a result, the U.S.’s “commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation” was being “overtaken” by peer countries, placing “our very future as a Nation and a people” in jeopardy (ibid, p. 13).

Of the 13 empirical “indicators” of this precarious situation, 8 explicitly refer to poor and/or declining performance by U.S. students on standardized tests (the qualities of which are not discussed, let alone questioned). With standardized tests understood to be legitimate and unbiased tools with which to measure learning, the report moves into speculation about what had caused the U.S. public school system’s slide into mediocrity. The primary reason, according to the NCEE, was that “Americans” seemed to have “lost sight of the *basic purposes* of schooling, and of the *high expectations* and *disciplined effort* needed to attain them” (ibid, p. 13-14, emphasis added). The “basic purpose” referred to here – not named explicitly but apparent from the context provided by the balance of the report – was the continuous expansion of the supply and productivity of labor. More specifically (and stripped of any rhetorical veneer) the purpose of public schooling as implied by the NCEE was to provide capital with a sufficient supply of laborers capable of fully drawing out the productive potential of ongoing technological discoveries and their application in the workplace.

The nature of the “high expectations” and “disciplined effort” needing to be reestablished to these ends, on the other hand, were alluded to negatively in the “Findings” section. Here the reader learns that students in U.S. high schools have been given far too much choice in terms of which courses to take, and that, as a result, far too many of them were avoiding difficult yet employment-relevant subjects like math, foreign language, and science in favor of “less demanding” physical education and “personal development” courses. Additionally, it is stated with concern that the typical school day in the U.S. was too short (compared to “England and other industrialized countries” [p. 29]), students were being assigned declining quantities of homework, teachers were using classroom time ineffectively, and study habits were being trained in a “haphazard and unplanned” fashion (p. 30). A major reason for the latter two problems was said to be that “not enough of the academically able students [were] being attracted to teaching,” and university-based teacher preparation programs were spending too much time on educational methods at the expense of subject matter-specific training. In short, both students and teachers had been held to ‘low’ expectations, and permitted to engage in an ‘undisciplined’ pedagogy.

Combined, these trends were allowing public school pedagogy to stray from vocational preparation, and thereby creating a dangerous mismatch between the capabilities of the average high school graduate and the skill requirements of the average job opening. The lesson taken from ANAR – and, by extension, from the Coleman Report – by those working in the federal Department of Education and affiliated with the education reform movement has clearly been that a set of universal curricular and pedagogical expectations needed to be established, and used to hold teachers and school administrators accountable for student performance. In other words, ANAR pushed the national discussion about educational equitability further away from the need to provide equal support, and more towards one about the need to establish equal expectations, in

the name of countering the perceived rudderlessness of the American classroom. As the next section demonstrates, this conservative ontology of equitability has remained central to educational legislation ever since.

Advocating a Cure: Unilateral Accountability

Title I of the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), signed into law by Lyndon Johnson in 1965, was labeled “Financial Assistance To Local Educational Agencies For The Education Of Children Of Low-Income Families.” When Bill Clinton signed the Improving America’s Schools Act into law nearly three decades later in 1994 (reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act), the label attached to Title I became “Helping Disadvantaged Children Meet High Standards.” The ‘Helping’ part here turns out to be largely redundant, however, as the ‘Declaration of Policy and Statement of Purpose’ section of the 1994 Act refers to (without citing) research supposedly showing that the act of establishing high expectations for children from disadvantaged homes *in and of itself* was the most promising means of improving their academic performance²⁸. Thus, a more accurate name for Title I of Clinton’s Improving America’s Schools Act would have been “Helping Disadvantaged Children Meet High Standards by Making It Clear That They Are Expected to Meet Those Standards.”

More importantly, the Improving America’s Schools Act allowed State education boards to develop their own standards and statewide examinations with which to determine whether individual schools were making “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) (also defined by the state) towards ‘proficiency.’ The 1994 Act also introduced the requirement that state and local education agencies hold schools and school systems accountable for failure to make AYP. State boards were required to take ‘corrective’ actions against Local Educational Agencies (i.e. school districts and systems) failing to meet AYP for four consecutive years, and Local Educational

Agencies were required to do the same to individual schools failing to meet AYP for three consecutive years²⁹.

When the ESEA was reauthorized as the comparatively infamous No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, Title I was once again renamed, this time to “Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged” – now lacking recognition of the longstanding precedent that disadvantaged students, and the schools serving them, ought to be provided with additional ‘help,’ support, or consideration. At NCLB’s signing ceremony, George Bush explained that “[t]he fundamental principle of this bill is that every child can learn, *we expect* every child to learn, and *you must* show us whether or not every child is learning” (cited in Korte, 2015, emphasis added). NCLB stepped up the use of AYP as a coercive tool by establishing a firm deadline – the spring of 2014 – by which all students (literally 100% of them) in each school must meet their state’s definition of grade-level ‘proficiency’ in reading and math, to be determined primarily by scores on state administered standardized tests. With a fixed date for universal ‘proficiency’ in place, the adequacy of progress made towards full compliance with state achievement standards would no longer be determined subjectively by state boards of education, but would instead be a matter of whether or not a given year’s test score gains met the gains the state committed to make for that year on an AYP timeline, beginning with the 2001-2002 school year and ending in the spring of 2014.

Importantly, NCLB required schools to track and report test score gains for their entire student bodies, and separately for their “economically disadvantaged students,” “students from major racial and ethnic groups,” “students with disabilities,” and “students with limited English proficiency.” The Act gets its name from the requirement that schools must make test score gains in *each* of these categories that meet or exceed its pre-planned aggregate test score

improvements in order for the state to be considered in compliance with NCLB's AYP rule. This component of the Act has been praised by civil rights groups, who contend that holding state and local education boards accountable in this way forces them to dedicate additional resources to students whose unique needs may otherwise be neglected (Simpson, 2015; The Education Trust, 2015). Yet the implication of this requirement is that schools serving the U.S.'s largest share of poor, minority, disabled, and ESL students would be the most likely to be punished for inadequate test score gains, in the form of reduced funding, staff firings, or school closures. In other words, the schools that under any just/sound educational financing system would receive compensatory resources beyond those offered to all schools have been the most likely to *lose* resources as a result of this requirement of NCLB.

In 2015, the ESEA was reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This most recent iteration of the ESEA gives states some choice about when (but not how often) to test their students, allows states some flexibility in how to measure the learning of their most intellectually challenged students, and provides states with the autonomy to determine the nature of the corrective actions taken against schools failing to meet planned test score performance increases. Heeding “grit” researcher Angela Duckworth’s call (see p. 104-105 above), the law also requires states to integrate a “non-academic” factor of their choice into their existing accountability systems. Among the factors suggested in the text of the law are “student engagement,” “educator engagement,” “student access to and completion of advanced coursework,” “postsecondary readiness,” and “school climate and safety.”

At the ESSA signing ceremony, Barack Obama noted that while the bill he would be signing was an improvement over the one it was replacing, “[t]he goals of No Child Left Behind...were the right ones: High standards. Accountability. Closing the achievement gap”

(Korte, 2015). As is the case for the conventional academic data states have been required to collect since NCLB, the data on whichever non-academic factor each state chooses to incorporate under the ESSA must be tracked for all racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, children from low-income families, and English-language learners. As a further signal that expectation, rather than support, now reflects the nature of the educational equity being sought by those in charge of educational policy in the U.S., Title I under the ESSA was once again renamed, this time as “Improving Basic Programs Operated by State and Local Educational Agencies,” so as to lack any titular reference at all to the kinds of imbalance or disadvantage that inspired the original law.

To be clear, the continued existence of Title I is evidence that the federal government has not yet entirely abandoned the idea that schools in high-poverty areas require financial resources above and beyond what those in comparatively wealthy areas receive. Yet the gradual changes made to the name given to Title I of the ESEA through its various iterations reflect a mutation in the ontology of educational equitability underlying the logic behind the formation of educational policy. When the ESEA was originally written, the goals of balance and equity were met with targeted support. Five decades later, the ESSA addresses the same goals with a uniform set of injunctions tied to universally applicable sanctions.

The medium through which actors in the educational system are meant to demonstrate their compliance with this set of injunctions is, of course, standardized testing, which has been positioned as a means of providing public education in the U.S. with a sense of purpose and direction, but also as a way to ensure that children from otherwise marginalized demographics are not “left behind.” Normalizing the practice of holding schools and individual teachers ‘accountable’ for student performance on these exams in this way has been used to artificially

isolate the causes of poor educational performance among “at-risk” children that can be attributed to their family/home lives from the material impacts of inequitable social relations and institutional architectures (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990; Jackson, 2013). Standardized testing linked to punitive sanctions also provides the state with a means of centralizing control over not just curriculum but pedagogy as well, given the pressure it places on localized school administrators and educators hoping to remain employed as such to orient their everyday practice around the goal of improving student retention of prescribed materials at the expense of others (Au, 2007; 2009; 2013).

Imposing Order and a Sense of Purpose on Public School Classrooms

There is an insidious synergy between the “broken windows”-inspired models of school discipline that have been used to allay manufactured fears about the chaos supposedly reigning in schools attended by low-income, black, and Hispanic students, and the standardized tests that have been used to provide U.S. public schools with a common sense of purpose. While the former is meant to cause students to become more compliant behaviorally through the threats of humiliation and/or introduction into the criminal justice system, the latter are meant to ensure that students also become compliant intellectually by circumscribing the curricular content they are exposed to and the roles available to them in the process of knowledge production. From the perspective of the education reform movement, students must be passive rather than active learners because students from disadvantaged (i.e. black, Hispanic, low-income) homes and/or neighborhoods are the metaphorical vectors through which the social pathologies of ignorance, defeatism, and anti-social behavior are otherwise replicated within the broader body politic. Ultimately, the promise made by the education reform movement is to inoculate students, and

thereby the state itself, against such social pathogens in the name of macro-economic growth and national security.

Conclusion

Pointing to “the dubiousness of maintaining that relationships between self and other are innocent of power,” (p. 469) Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) has argued that speaking of another’s ‘culture’ now plays the role that assigning essential characteristic to the various ‘races’ once did, in the sense that both involve creating artificial categories of people that lend themselves to the creation of social hierarchies and the legitimation of the latter’s reproduction. In this paper I have argued that the narratives popularized by the education reform movement attempt to explain (away) inequality by attributing poverty and oppression to a set of pathological cultural traits allegedly prevalent among those who suffer these social ills with the greatest intensity. I have aimed to show that, to that end, the rhetoric of the reform movement has produced and contributed to the reification of two imaginarily bounded spaces – the Troubled Home and the Chaotic Classroom – in which defeatism, unruliness, and intellectual apathy are supposedly replicated and transmitted, in isolation from broader social currents and power structures.

In addition to the physically and epistemically violent consequences of the pedagogical practices the reform movement advocates as inoculation against the social pathologies that are said to proliferate in these two spaces, I contend that this agenda obscures the transformative potential of knowledge production by framing educational attainment as a means of escaping rather than seeking more just social arrangements within one’s present socio-spatial circumstances. That is, it seems that the education reform movement’s message to underprivileged youth is that being a diligent student provides them with an individualized path from the Troubled Homes (and, by extension, neighborhoods) they come from to the freedom

and prosperity promised by the global labor market, rather than the capacity to collaboratively effect progressive social change in situ. The education reform movement's interpellation of students as aspiring careerists, held back only by their own lack of ambition and discipline, stands in the way of the kind of solidarity that could be built around the recognition that disaffection with and anger at a society that continually fails to meet the needs of wide swaths of its constituents are entirely appropriate sentiments. Removing impediments to this recognition, and offering counter narratives to those deployed in support of the kinds of disciplinary pedagogy highlighted in this paper should be priorities of progressive and activist educators.

¹ ...and individuals arrogating to themselves the authority to use deadly force in a police-like fashion (e.g. George Zimmerman)

² Allen made this comment via Twitter, but deleted it following a strong critical response from members of Baltimore's activist community and public school advocates from across the country (see Williams, 2015).

³ Mead has insisted that Americans generally supported welfare reform because the system that existed before PRWORA conflicted with the American ideals of personal responsibility and independence (2010). However, using data from a national survey conducted in 1991, Martin Gilens has shown that in the lead up to the 1996 Act, racial attitudes were actually the most significant correlate with whether one supported or opposed the pre-PRWORA welfare system in the U.S. (Gilens, 1996). Specifically, the view that 'blacks are lazy' was a stronger predictor of opposition to welfare than whether or not a respondent expressed the belief that poor people in general are lazy, identified as strongly individualistic, identified as a Democrat or Republican, or identified as liberal or conservative.

⁴ The majority of poor families in the U.S. are, of course, already familiar with the "culture of work." Nearly three-quarters of those poor enough to receive government benefits live in families with at least one working member (Allegretto et al, 2013). Many in the remaining quarter are, in fact, retired from a lifetime of work.

⁵ Critical scholars of education have used the term "hidden curriculum" to refer to the norms, values, beliefs, and self-positioning one is taught in a school setting that are not part of the formal curriculum (Anyon, 1980; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1978). The schools discussed after this point in this paper, on the other hand, make the imposition of norms, values, and beliefs an intentionally visible, central aspect of their formal curriculum.

⁶ See notes 2, 5, 8, 34, and 43-45 in Seligman (1972)

⁷ Seligman's insights on the use of torture to create a sense of helplessness have not been lost on the CIA, who invited him to give a talk on his research in 2002 (Jaschik, 2008). Seligman has defended his visit to the CIA by claiming that his remarks there were meant to help the U.S. military train its soldiers to avoid learned helplessness, and insisting that he has not played a direct role in the agency's use of torture.

⁸ For example, there is *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook of Classification* (2004).

⁹ The University of Pennsylvania's Authentic Happiness website lists allows registered users to access a variety of questionnaires and indexes, including the Satisfaction With Life Scale, the Optimism Test, the Gratitude Survey, and

the Authentic Happiness Inventory, and the Transgression Motivation Questionnaire (<https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu>).

¹⁰ e.g. Positive Psychology Network, and the International Positive Psychology Association.

¹¹ *The Journal of Positive Psychology* began publication in 2006.

¹² The University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center was created by Dr. Seligman in 2003 (<http://www.positivepsychology.org>).

¹³ U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, like many public figures (see above), often describes education as “the civil rights issue of our generation” (e.g. Duncan, 2011; 2013a; 2013b). At the same time, Duncan regularly argues vigorously against the idea that persistent racial and/or class issues must be dealt with before the so-called ‘achievement gap’ can be closed (e.g. 2012a; 2012b; 2013b). Similarly, former Washington DC public schools chancellor Michelle Rhee (2013) has argued that concerns about poverty’s effects on learning have been used as a way to avoid confronting epidemic levels of teacher and school inadequacy. It is also common for those allied with the education reform movement to cynically portray the arguments of those who acknowledge the fact that poverty impedes learning as *instead* arguing that children from low-income and minority families are inherently incapable of learning. While on the campaign trail during his run for the presidency in 1999, George Bush told an audience at the NAACP that, as president, he would confront “the soft bigotry of low expectations” held by those who considered one’s race and/or class to be determinative of their life trajectory by aggressively reforming the U.S.’s public schools (Bush, 2000). More recently, in an exchange with educator and activist Anthony Cody, Irvin Scott of the Gates Foundation argued that by marshaling “an assortment of facts and statistics” showing a link between poverty and educational outcomes, Cody was effectively saying that “children living in poverty cannot learn and that until the status quo changes we should lower our expectations for poor children” (Scott & Childress, 2012).

¹⁴ See <http://www.kipp.org/our-approach/character>

¹⁵ In 2013, Rangel was forced to step down from his position as CEO of UNO in the midst of a federal Securities and Exchange Commission investigation into the school’s use of state construction funds (Byrne & Dardick, 2013).

¹⁶ The vast majority of students that attend the schools discussed here – KIPP (KIPP, 2014, p. 10), Democracy Prep (Lautzenheiser & Kelly, 2013, p. 3), NHA (Jacobs, 2013, p. 5), and UNO (Feith, 2013, p. 1) – come from low-income families. Nationwide, charter schools serve a greater percentage of children eligible for free or price-reduced lunch than public schools (Goodman, 2013, p. 1).

¹⁷ Anecdotal evidence suggests that the elite members of the education reform movement choose to send their own children to schools that look nothing like those subjected to the policy agenda they have imposed on other people’s children. For example, though Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is a consistent proponent of charter schools (which are mostly non-union), the Common Core State (curricular) Standards, and using test scores to evaluate teachers, the Chicago Lab School where he sends his own children is fully unionized, does not use the Common Core, and does not evaluate its teachers using student test scores (Strauss, 2015).

¹⁸ As Williams (2011) points out, counterinsurgency is not limited to military action in foreign territories or neo/colonial possessions, but instead encompasses a variety of political, economic, psychological, and social tactics designed to establish and maintain the legitimacy of the a particular set of power relations in both foreign and domestic spheres.

¹⁹ The story in *Dangerous Minds* is based on the autobiography of the actual Louanne Johnson, titled *My Posse Don’t Do Homework*, published in 1993.

²⁰ The popularity of *Gangsta’s Paradise* played a large role in allowing the film to overcome its initially poor reviews by critics. The song, which accompanied *Dangerous Minds* on the film’s trailer and commercials, helped it receive four separate nominations at the 1996 MTV Movie Awards.

²¹ The ‘struggling inner city school’ is, of course, also a common setting for episodes or seasons of popular television series.

²² For the role that film plays in shaping the public’s spatial imaginary and understanding of social issues, see Lukinbeal & Zimmerman (2006)

²³ I label *City Journal* ‘conservative’ as shorthand for the fact that it is published by the Manhattan Institute, which describes itself on the front page of its website as “[a] leading free-market think tank,” and lists “welfare reform, tort reform, proactive policing, and supply-side tax policies” as “the heart” of its legacy (see ‘About MI’ <http://www.manhattan-institute.org/about>). More relevant to the discussion at hand, *City Journal* touts itself on its own website as once being “an idea factory” for Giuliani “as the then-mayor revived New York City” (see <http://www.city-journal.org/html/about.html>).

²⁴ During the 2011-2012 school year, 1 in every 275 black students were subjected to school-related arrest, compared to 1 in every 696 white students. These represent the author’s calculations using data provided on page 6 of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights School Discipline Snapshot for 2014.

²⁵ Commissioner of Education was the title of the individual in charge of the Office of Education, before the latter became the United States Department of Education, and its leader became a member of the Presidential Cabinet known as the Secretary of Education.

²⁶ This is ironic because, as Au has documented in great detail, the origins of the practice of categorizing people according to their scores on standardized tests can be traced back to the era of eugenics (Au, 2009).

²⁷ The stated purpose of the formation of this panel was, according to the document it eventually produced, to “help define the problems afflicting American education and to provide solutions” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 6). What this statement reveals, beyond the nature of the NCEE’s mandate, is that its authors began their research with the assumption that there were in fact “problems afflicting” public schooling in the U.S. The flimsy epistemological foundations of this assumption become clear in the report’s Introduction, where the reader learns that “[t]he Commission was created as a result of the Secretary’s [i.e. Bell’s] concern about “the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system”” (ibid, p. 9). That is, the rationale for the document that effectively spawned the education reform movement was that the Secretary of Education *perceived* that the public *perceived* that the public schools were ineffective.

²⁸ Title I, Section 1001, Subsection C, Item 2 of the Improving America’s Schools Act signed into law by Bill Clinton in 1994 also acknowledges that:

“Conditions outside the classroom such as hunger, unsafe living conditions, homelessness, unemployment, violence, inadequate health care, child abuse, and drug and alcohol abuse can adversely affect children’s academic achievement and must be addressed...”

However, just two years later Clinton ended “welfare as we know it” by signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, despite being provided beforehand with a report showing that PRWORA would send an additional 1.1 million children into poverty (Zedlewski et al, 1996, see Edelman, 1997).

²⁹ Among the types of “corrective action” listed in the Improving America’s Schools Act were: the withholding of funds; the “reconstitution” of school or district personnel; the removal of particular schools from the jurisdiction of the LEA; decreased decision-making authority at a school; the abolition or restructuring of the LEA; the authorizing of students to transfer from a school operated by one LEA to another school operated by the same LEA or operated by another LEA; and the transformation of a public school into a charter school.

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APPENDIX B

Human Capital and Uneven Development

To be submitted to *ACME*

By Jared Powell

Abstract

As the assumptions underlying ‘supply side’ economics took root in both of the U.S.’s major political parties in the last quarter of the 20th century, elected and appointed policymakers began to lose interest in the maintenance of effective demand and the social safety net, instead shifting their legislative efforts to the removal of impediments to private sector-led economic expansion, and the imposition of an individuated, market rationality. Over the same period, representatives of both parties, members of the business community, writers at influential think tanks, and acritical academics have framed educational attainment as “investment” in “human capital,” the idea being that individuals should become, to paraphrase Foucault, entrepreneurs of themselves. Over the last three decades, the logic of human capital has been used to promote the idea that the amelioration of social ills once addressed collectively through a variety of downwardly redistributive institutions can be more effectively addressed through individualized self-improvement. This paper argues that the popularity of human capital logic among the elite owes far more to its accommodation of their predispositions with regard to the fundamental causes of inequity, and rhetorical capacity to rationalize uneven development, than either its insightfulness or explanatory power.

Introduction

At the National Convention of the Democratic Party in September of 2012, incumbent Barack Obama (2012a) asked voters for a second term as president of the United States by claiming that his candidacy allowed them to “choose a future where more Americans have the chance to gain the skills they need to compete, no matter how old they are or how much money they have.” Though reading like a promise, this line contains at least three contingencies.

Voting for Obama, according to this excerpt, would provide “more” (i.e. not all) Americans with the “chance” (i.e. possibility) of accumulating the skills necessary to “compete” (perhaps successfully, perhaps not) against other job seekers. Though abstracted from the balance of Obama’s speech that night, this uncertainty-laden passage is entirely in line with the rhetorical thrust of the Democratic Party over the last four decades. In the wake of a series of national electoral defeats to the Republicans in the 1970s and 1980s, party leaders decided to change their message from one centered on stability, entitlement, and equality to one celebrating flexibility, opportunity, and meritocracy (e.g. Peters, 1983; Galston & Kamarck, 1989; Clinton, 1991; Pink, 1998).

Accordingly, the liberal¹ approach to social reproduction has been transformed from one in which the direct provision of cash and material necessities was a key component, to one focused primarily on providing a larger share of the population with the chance to prove their worthiness of material wellbeing through various forms of self-improvement. Central to this transition has been the increased importance liberals have placed on reforming the U.S.’s public school system. Though providing greater access to education for marginalized groups has long been a stated aspiration of the Democratic Party, narrowing the “achievement gap” between poor/minority students and affluent/white students, and improving the scores earned by U.S. students on internationally administered standardized exams are now regularly presented as *prerequisites* for the amelioration of poverty and inequality by liberal politicians, representatives of the business community, and the organic intellectuals these groups task with running state institutions. For example, Democratic Senator Michael Bennett of Colorado has stated that “if you want to cure this problem of poverty in our country, the way to do that is by making sure that people can read when they’re in first grade. That’s *the most important thing* we can do”

(Bennett, 2015, emphasis added). Echoing this sentiment, Microsoft co-founder and education reform leader Bill Gates has suggested that we ought to “end the myth that we have to solve poverty before we improve education” because “it’s more the other way around: improving education is *the best way* to solve poverty” (Gates, 2011, emphasis added). Going even further than Bennett and Gates, former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has claimed that “*the only way* to end poverty is through education” (Tough, 2012, emphasis added).

Earlier, in a speech delivered at the World Bank in 2011, Duncan identified education as “the key to eliminating gender inequality, to reducing poverty, to creating a sustainable planet, to preventing needless deaths and illness, and to fostering peace.” Not *a* key, but *the* key – the implication being that things like legislation, redistribution, diplomacy, and state intervention are no longer appropriate to the task of addressing discrimination, material hardship, military conflict, and economic uncertainty, respectively². The liberal faith in education has allowed for a kind of tunnel vision through which educational improvement is promoted and pursued as the social justice skeleton key at the expense of other means of addressing persistent social ills. Exemplary of this view is an essay recently published in the *U.S. News and World Report* by Peter Cunningham, former assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Education (2009-2012) and current director of the education reform organization Education Post, in which he declared: “I support every effort to address poverty and segregation, but not at the expense of needed reforms” (Cunningham, 2016). In other words, the objective that has long served as the rhetorical rationale for education reform – reducing poverty and inequality – *must now take a backseat to education reform itself*. In the next paragraph of the same essay, Cunningham provided readers with the question to which the line just mentioned was the answer, in the process laying bare the incentive structure driving the elite preference for education reform over

more direct forms of progressive social change: “Should America spend hundreds of billions more to reduce poverty and should we risk more bitter battles to reduce segregation, or should we just double down on our efforts to improve schools?” (ibid).

Having settled on educational improvement and as the paramount objective of domestic social policy, liberalism’s elite thinkers are more or less openly abandoning those left behind by the celebrated transition into the ‘knowledge economy.’ Trying to explain the populist appeal of the brash, xenophobic Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump among some low-income and working class voters vis-à-vis the comparatively sober Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, NPR’s economics reporter Adam Davidson had the following to say:

I know Hillary Clinton’s economic team fairly well, and I’m very impressed by them.

They really are top-notch economists and economic policy thinkers. They don’t have anything for a 55-year-old laid-off factory worker in Michigan or northeastern

Pennsylvania, or whatever. They don’t have anything to offer them. And so I think it’s

intuitively understandable that a screaming, loud, wrong answer is more compelling than

a very calm, reasonable, accurate, right answer which is: your life is just going to be

worse for the rest of your life... (Bouie, Davidson & Martin, 2016, 23:45, emphasis added)

It seems, in other words, that for Duncan, Cunningham, Davidson, and those with whom they share a worldview, the only way for societies to become more equitable and for individuals to avoid a continuous degeneration of their standard of living is to satisfy the contemporary labor market’s allegedly³ insatiable appetite for knowledgeable and skilled labor.

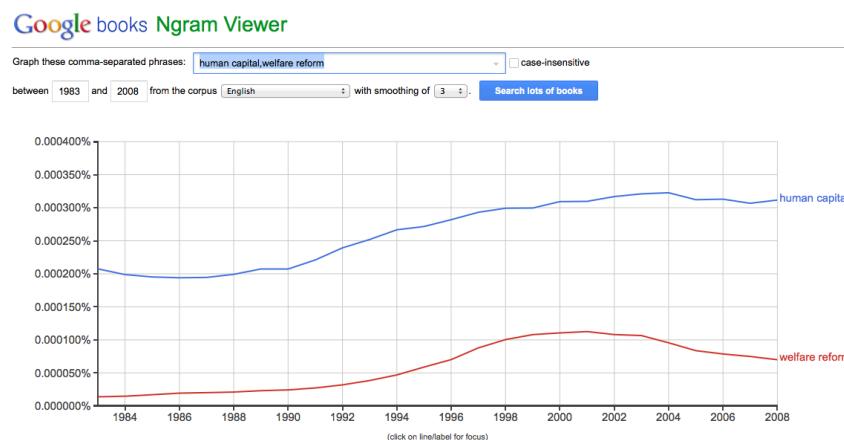
Efforts to promote this narrative are typically saturated with financial metaphors and framed by the understanding that continual economic growth (normally in terms of GDP or GDP

per capita) is the foundation on which human wellbeing rests. Later in Duncan's World Bank speech he lauded its "investment" in educational development worldwide, and, more specifically, its "use of a variety of monetary and non-monetary incentives to drive innovation" in the educational systems of poor countries. In the same speech, Duncan approvingly quoted World Bank alumnus Lawrence Summers⁴ as having argued that "investment in girls' education" was likely "the highest-return investment available in the developing world."⁵ Closing the speech, Duncan then explained the geoeconomic importance of educational improvement in the developing world, noting that "the economic future of the United States rests...on citizens in other nations raising their living standards," and "expanding educational attainment everywhere is the best way to grow the [economic] pie for all" (Duncan, 2011). Although its possible that the content of Duncan's speech merely reflects an attempt to cater to his World Bank audience, the consensus built around neoliberalism⁶ over the last four decades has brought with it the discursive capture of entire realms of American society by financial logic and language (Harvey, 2008; Joseph, 2014; Katz, 2008; Martin, 2007; Means, 2011; Read, 2009). As a result, market parlance has been the medium through which political elites and their surrogates have propounded on the importance of public education for several decades now (Adamson, 2009; Pierce, 2013)⁷.

But while it is vital that the capture of educational discourse by the language of capital is resisted, the use of "investment" as a metaphor for the accumulation of education as preparation for the labor market makes a certain amount of sense, even from a critical perspective. For one thing, educational credentialing is speculative. Whatever the intrinsic rewards and labor market advantages one secures through increased educational attainment, there is no guarantee that augmenting ones knowledge and/or skills will translate into higher wages or more secure

employment⁸. Second, there is a lag period between the initial outlays of time, effort, and and/or money that one devotes to their education and the point at which one can hope for a financial return. That is, the portion of one’s income attributable to additional education does not appear as such until that education has been completed and employment offering higher wages only attainable as a result of that education has been secured. The superficial appropriateness of “investment” as a metaphor for education is significant because around the same time that the political class and business community began ‘rolling out’ their excited rhetoric about ramped up “investments” in speculative, time-lagged improvements in the knowledge and skills of future laborers as a stand-alone solution to poverty under the banner of “education reform,” the government began ‘rolling back’ its spending on tangible forms of cash and cash-like assistance that directly and immediately softened the worst effects of poverty, through what came to be known as “welfare reform” (see Figure 2).⁹

Figure 1 – The similar trajectories of “human capital” and “welfare reform”



This paper shows that the nearly simultaneous swapping out of one form of state “investment” in social reproduction for another – in this case the replacement of immediately usable material benefits with vows to ensure that more individuals eventually become productive laborers – was deliberate rather than merely coincidental. I suggest that as the Democratic Party

sought to distance itself from the ‘New Deal’ and ‘Great Society’ iterations of 20th century U.S. liberalism as part of its accommodation to the ‘conservative restoration’ of the late 1970s and 1980s, it became necessary to identify an alternative to redistribution capable of serving as the centerpiece of its approach to addressing poverty and inequality. For a variety of reasons that I explain later in the paper, targeted efforts to increase educational attainment and vocational skills in low-income, black, and Hispanic communities were perfectly suited to this task. In the first section of what follows, I locate the precursor to the contemporary liberal effort to equate state led improvements in educational attainment with direct, monetary forms of poverty alleviation in a theory developed by a group of academic economists in the 1950s and 1960s, which held that one’s knowledge, skills, health, and mobility constituted something called “human capital.” Reifying their construct as a form of return-generating wealth, these economists argued that self-improvement in these four areas offered individuals economic agency analogous to that enjoyed by holders of conventional forms of capital. With the arrival of “endogenous growth theory” to the discipline of economics several decades later, acritical¹⁰ economists and economic geographers began to argue that investments in human capital were the primary driver of economic growth and development for cities, regions, and countries. Sidelining political, institutional, and structural-cyclical factors, scholars of the “new economic geography” sought to use endogenous growth theory to show that the uneven development of the economy was largely, if not entirely, a product of the uneven distribution of human capital, and thus that the way for depressed areas to reanimate their economies was to attract highly educated, talented, skilled, and/or creative new residents.

Unfortunately for those living in the U.S. on little or zero market income¹¹, educational improvement and skill development have turned out to be very poor substitutes for money,

housing subsidies, and food assistance. In the second part of the paper, I show that while human capital theory has proven itself vital to exploitation-free, reform-amenable explanations of inequality and uneven development, it is plagued by a number of untenable assumptions, and fails to comport with empirical data on the relationship between educational attainment and economic outcomes (for both individuals and geographic areas). With insights from Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1998), I argue "capital" is a deeply flawed metaphor for knowledge and skill, and educational attainment has far less of an impact on social mobility and geographical convergence than human capitalists would like to believe, especially when compared to other political-economic and social factors that are typically absent from their analyses. Ultimately, then, the argument of this paper is that the popularity of human capital logic among liberal elites owes far more to the utility it provides those seeking to rationalize inequality and the "vagabondage" (Katz, 2001) of capital than its insightfulness into the actual causes of social and geographical unevenness. The goal of this argument is to inspire and provide a discursive entry point for resistance to the 'common sense' that has been built around the idea that diligent investment in oneself is an effective form of protection against the exploitative essence of the capitalist mode of production.

Human Capital Theory

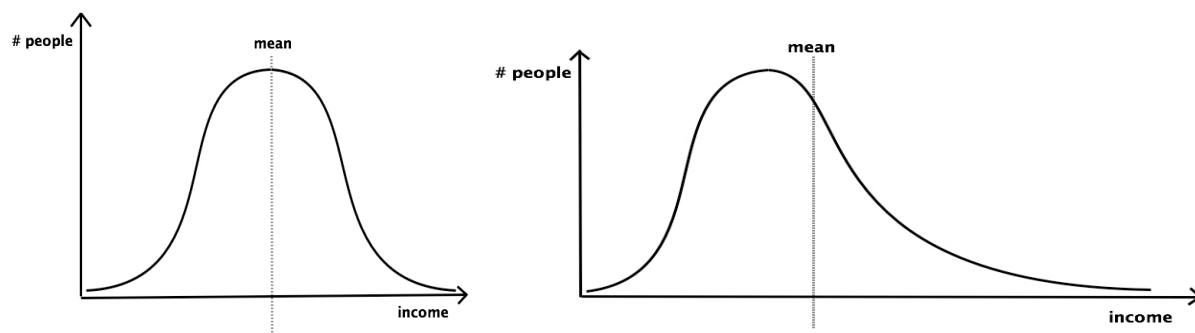
"Up to a point, you treat people like machines. But it's only up to a point."

-- Gary Becker, 2012

Human capital theory was first developed in the 1950s and 1960s by academic economists in search of a way to account for unequal distributions of income. One of the first to use the term and develop it into a social theory was Jacob Mincer (1958), whose work on the subject began when he noticed that data on the distribution of incomes in the U.S. produced a contradiction between two hypotheses commonly used in economic research to that point. The

first of these hypotheses was that mental and physical abilities were distributed more or less normally (statistically speaking), meaning that these abilities were thought to be distributed along a bell curve, with the majority of the population possessing something close to ‘average’ ability and relatively small shares of the population possessing either very high or very low ability. The second hypothesis was that an individual’s income was largely a product of their individual abilities. Were both of these hypotheses true, Mincer reasoned, it would follow that incomes would be distributed normally across the population, meaning that most people could expect to earn something close to the average income, while a smaller number of very able individuals would be expected to earn more than the average, and vice versa. And yet, Mincer pointed out, incomes in the U.S. were positively skewed, meaning that a small share of the population was receiving incomes well beyond what their abilities would be expected to command, pulling the average income up to a point higher than the median income such that more than half of the population was receiving an income below the average (see Figure 3).¹²

Figure 2 – A normal distribution (left) and a positively skewed distribution (right)



To Mincer, this signaled that something other than ability must have been affecting the income of top earners (Mincer, 1958). He identified this ‘something’ as “training,” a term encompassing both formal education and learning on the job. Unwilling to allow social or political issues to enter the analysis (explicitly referring to these in the paper as “non-economic

factors”), Mincer chose to focus on the relationship between individual “investments” in training and income through the lens of rational choice theory, which naturally lead him to argue that inequality was ultimately a product of the differential willingness among individuals to invest in their own “human capital.” Top earners were simply those who made the largest initial investments in their own ‘training,’ and were thereby able to compound their earnings advantage over the less-educated by repeatedly parlaying the knowledge and skills acquired through this training (i.e. ‘reinvesting’ their human capital) into higher levels of training, allowing them to earn progressively higher wages along the way. A key contention in Mincer’s essay was that even if ability and opportunity were distributed evenly rather than ‘normally’ across the population, income inequality would likely persist because not all people would choose the same type or amount of training. Thus one of the primary contributions of Mincer’s seminal work on human capital was to remove income inequality from the influences of politics and structure by relocating it almost entirely within the purview of individual choice and agency.¹³

Sharing the sense that acquired human capacities ought to be treated as a form of capital, Theodore Schultz subsequently applied Mincer’s microeconomic insights to the macro issue of national economic output. In the conventional neoclassical growth accounting equation¹⁴, the annual change in economic output in a given country was treated as a function of (1) change in the size of its aggregate stock of fixed capital, (2) change in the total number of hours worked, and (3) change in a residual variable referred to as “total factor productivity,” a term used to capture output growth beyond what could be attributed to increases in capital and/or labor hours, and which was therefore assumed to be due to the ever-increasing application of productivity enhancing technology in workplaces. Schultz argued that by burying “investments in man” (e.g. education and training) within an amorphous total factor productivity term¹⁵, the prevailing

approach to understanding the causes of economic output ironically obscured the actual source of a preponderant share of the U.S.'s high levels of economic growth in the post WWII years (Schultz, 1959; 1960). For Schultz, in other words, macroeconomic growth in the U.S. was more a product of "improvement in the quality of the labor force" than either increases in the amount of tangible capital used in production, the number of hours worked, or the use of technology.

Schultz went on to suggest that the causal relationship between human capital accumulation and economic expansion was likely true regardless of geographical context, and that Western governments and NGOs should therefore encourage developing countries to invest a greater share of their public funds in 'human capital' accumulation, even if that meant investing less in physical/conventional forms of capital (infrastructure, machinery, utilities, industrial facilities) (Schultz, 1959; 1961; 1993). According to Schultz's "human wealth hypothesis," uneven geographical development was a product of divergent investment decisions made by states (wealthy/powerful countries had invested heavily in education and training while developing countries were dedicating their scarce resources to physical capital) rather than an inherent tendency of the world's prevailing geopolitical and economic systems. In this way, the determinative roles of choice and agency that were the foundation of Mincer's approach to intra-national inequity were fundamental to Schultz's work on inter-national inequality as well.

In his Presidential Address to the American Economic Association in 1961, Schultz expanded the scope of the human capital concept to include expenditures on health and migration, the idea being that they, too, were capable of leading to higher productivity of, and therefore wages for, laborers¹⁶. The idea here was that healthier workers (all else being equal) would be capable of working longer hours and more productively, and that the more mobile a worker the more likely it is that s/he would be able to relocate in accordance with the fluid

geography of favorable labor market conditions. Building on this insight, Burton Weisbrod argued a year later that in addition to their effects on individual earning capacities, governmental and individual investments in health, schooling, and locational mobility also generated a variety of positive externalities for society writ large (Weisbrod, 1962). Like the individual returns to human capital, Weisbrod suggested that these societal returns could be quantified. Weisbrod argued, for example, that by acting as a form of childcare, elementary schools allowed mothers to join the workforce, adding to the national output and earnings. To estimate this payoff, Weisbrod multiplied an (arbitrary) estimate of the number of women who would not work without the childcare provided by schools (1 million) by an estimate of the average annual earnings of these women (\$2,000 each), and then divided this figure (\$2 billion) by the government's total outlays on elementary schools in 1956 (\$7.8 billion), coming up with a roughly 25% 'return on investment'¹⁷. He went on to suggest that similar estimates could and should be made of: (1) the effects that living with highly educated parents has on student test scores, (2) the social savings attributable to schooling's capacity to steer children away from "unsupervised activities" with "antisocial consequences" (p. 118), (3) the reduction in law enforcement costs attributable to lower unemployment resulting from more education, and (4) the intra-firm productivity spillover effects that an educated worker has on her co-workers. Weisbrod also claimed that public education benefitted society in a number of significant, but (even) less tangible ways, including the creation of a literate and numerate citizenry, "the existence of the market economy," and the preservation of democracy itself (p. 119).

Several years later, Milton Friedman dedicated a chapter of *Capitalism and Freedom* to a similar theme, namely, the societal 'returns' to public schooling. Friedman's primary goal, however, was to distinguish between forms of education that generated the kinds of positive

“neighborhood effects”¹⁸ Weisbrod described, and could therefore be justifiably subsidized by the state, and those, on the other hand, that would mostly or entirely benefit their individual recipients, and should therefore be paid for by individuals themselves (Freidman, 1982 [1962]). For example, Freidman argued that while one could at least make the case that responsibility for funding curriculum meant to imbue students with the knowledge and sentiments necessary to the maintenance of a “stable and democratic society” (p. 86) should be placed on the state, the same could not be said of types of education meant primarily to increase an individual’s human capital, a category including higher education or vocational/professional training. Responsibility for funding the latter, in Friedman’s view, should always fall to the individuals themselves.¹⁹

While Friedman’s work on monetary theory and policy, and association with the U.S.’s neocolonial interventionism in Latin America (Harvey, 2008; Klein, 2007) have overshadowed his limited work on education and human capital, one of his mentees at the University of Chicago was Gary Becker, aggressive proponent of human capital theory and author of the most widely cited manuscript on the subject: *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis* (1964)²⁰. While modeling the economic returns to personal investments in schooling were the primary focus of Becker’s book, the first substantive chapter is actually an extended discussion of on-the-job training (OJT) built around a two-part typology analogous in some ways to that developed by Friedman for schooling. Here Becker noted that although the potential for an increase in the productivity of labor would incentivize firms to invest in OJT, the soundness of the decision to make that kind of investment depended upon the nature of the training and the labor market context.

Investment in the “general training” of a firm’s workforce, which includes the development of human capital easily transferable between firms (e.g. basic computer skills) that

thereby raise the productivity of their possessors whether they stay with the company providing the training or move to one of its competitors, is a rational expenditure according to Becker only when the firm is either the only buyer in their industry's labor market, or is somehow able to make trainees pay for their own training (e.g. by accepting lower wages during their training period). What Becker is pointing out here is that workers who accumulate new skills that allow them to be more productive regardless of which firm they work for are incented to immediately take these skills back to the labor market and seek a higher wage than what they are being paid currently. According to the neoclassical assumption that competing firms will continuously attempt to outbid each other for laborers being paid less than the value of their output (because it is profitable to employ these laborers) until the wage rate within that industry has been bid up to the value of the average laborer's output (see note 15), the firm that provided the worker with this "general" training would then have to either let the worker leave for a higher paying position at a different firm, or pay them a wage equal to their productivity. In both cases the worker, rather than the firm, would capture the entire return on their augmented productivity.

The alternative to "general training" in Becker's typology was what he called "specific training": knowledge and/or skills that increase worker productivity more in the firm providing the training than they would at any other firm (e.g. training in how to operate the firm's proprietary software or machinery). The idea here is that the more specific to the individual firm is the human capital imparted through OJT, the greater the share of the productivity increase that will be captured by the firm. Investing in "specific" training was thus more rational for the profit maximizing firm than investing in "general" training. The upshot of this discussion is that in developing this argument, Becker, like Weisbrod and Friedman before him, helped establish as commonsensical the notion that the individual and collective benefits of public education were

separable, and therefore called for distinct funding streams. Establishing this distinction, in turn, contributed to the idea that education beyond what was required for the ‘reproduction of the conditions of production’ was not a social/public good, but rather an investment opportunity for rational, self-interested, autoentrepreneurs.

Most of the remainder of Becker’s book was then spent developing formulas through which available data on education and wages could be used to calculate the individual returns to different levels of investment in schooling²¹. Among his more significant empirical findings were that: (1) between the late 1930s and late 1950s college graduates as a whole made between 11% and 13% more than their peers who only graduated high school; (2) educational attainment *per se* played a much larger role than “ability,” parentage, or motivation in generating this so-called ‘college premium’; and (3) the rapid growth in college educated individuals in the middle of the 20th century had not negatively impacted wage rates for college graduates, contrary to what one might expect given the typical consequence of an increase in the supply of a given commodity. Becker interpreted this last point as suggesting that societal increases in college educatedness had itself created additional demand for college educated workers (e.g. by leading to the creation of new high skill industries and firms). What this suggested – that there was no upper bound to education’s capacity to generate societal wage increases – has been hugely influential in the intervening decades, particularly among those inclined to treat inequality as though it were a technical rather than structural-political problem.²²

To recap the discussion to this point, the essence of human capital theory is characterized by three foundational claims. First, knowledge and skills acquired either through on-the-job training or schooling constitute a form of return generating wealth comparable to conventional forms of capital, and can be analyzed as such. Secondly, inequality across the population is

largely a product of individual choices; unequal incomes reflect the differential willingness among people to invest in themselves. Uneven distributions of educational opportunity, hereditary traits, and other social factors may contribute to income and wealth inequality, say the human capital theorists, but to a lesser extent than the decisions individual actors make about how much to invest in their bank of knowledge and/or skills. And third, since everyone ultimately becomes a strategic investor in (human) capital as they reach young adulthood, it makes no sense to speak of distinct social classes, let alone class conflict. As entrepreneurs of themselves²³, constantly seeking the optimal allocation of their limited productive resources (e.g. time, energy), “laborers have become capitalists” in Theodore Schultz’s words (1961, p. 3).

Becker was more aggressive on this point. Rehearsing a familiar neoliberal refrain in a 1989 lecture²⁴, he argued that class-conscious critics of his construct were motivated less by a desire to engage in a good faith academic debate than by a need to save themselves the embarrassment of being associated with the logical conclusion of their own ideological inclinations:

...the concept of human capital remains suspect within academic circles that organize their thinking around a belief in the exploitation of labor by capital. It is easy to appreciate the problems created for this view by the human capital concept. For if capital exploits labor, does human capital exploit labor too – in other words, do some workers exploit other workers? And are skilled workers and unskilled workers pitted against each other in the alleged class conflict between labor and capital? If governments are to expropriate all capital to end such conflict, should they also expropriate human capital, so that governments would take over ownership of workers as well? (Becker, 1994 [1989], p. 16)

That is, if human capital is a valid concept, then those believing in the mutual incompatibility of the interests of labor and capital are – perhaps without realizing it – unwitting totalitarians. Whether a product of dishonesty or misapprehension, Becker’s defensive caricature of left economics serves as a indication of the political stakes he seemed to attach to winning acceptance of human capital theory among his peers and the policymaking elite. In a panel discussion on Foucault’s lecture series collectively published as *The Birth of Biopolitics* in 2012 (which named Becker and human capital theory as important elements of the rise of neoliberalism), Becker commented that while there was once “a battle to get human capital concepts accepted among American economists” and his early work was critiqued as “demeaning to the human being,” he was relieved to report that “the economists have forgotten about that now” and that “you cannot have a politician in the United States...get involved in any campaign without mentioning many times the words “human capital”” (Becker, Ewald & Harcourt, 2012, p. 13-14)²⁵. While neither the second (1975) nor third (1994) editions of *Human Capital* have included updated empirics on the returns to high school or college, both new editions *do* have updated prefaces in which Becker celebrates the popularity of human capital theory among other academics, politicians, and policymakers.²⁶

Human capital theory, spatialized

Becker was not wrong to celebrate. Over the last 40 years, human capital has become a mainstay within the discipline of economics, especially among those studying the causes of economic growth and con/divergence between locations. For most of the 20th century scholars working in this area were divided into two camps (Martin and Sunley, 1998). On the one hand were those arguing that, absent political barriers to the free operation of market forces, there exists a tendency for incomes to converge across space, as rapidly developing areas eventually

become saturated with fixed investment, which then incents capital to seek more profitable outlets elsewhere. On the other hand have been those arguing that market forces (again left to their own devices) instead tend to produce income *divergence* across space, as capital and the social/physical infrastructure necessary to support particular industries generate agglomeration effects that concentrate high productivity individuals and firms in select locations as a product of their initial advantages.

Since the mid-1980s, however, a third approach has emerged that considers growth in human capital and advancements in technology – rather than market forces *per se* – to be the primary determinants of economic growth. More importantly (and distinctively), this new approach has treated improvements in human capital and technology as outcomes of deliberate investment by governments and profit maximizing firms, rather than spontaneous, natural effects of overall human progress (e.g. Romer, 1990; Barro, 1991). Because these economists have treated the causes of economic growth – and, by extension, the causes of either convergence or divergence between locations – as *internal* to the decision-making of the state and corporate actors operating in particular locations, the body of scholarship they have produced came to be known as “endogenous growth theory”.

Since the early 1990s, endogenous growth theory gained adherents within the discipline of economics and related business school fields, and to some extent among acritical economic geographers as well. Authors contributing to this body of scholarship have typically made one or more of three main arguments. First, that countries, regions, or cities should attempt to accumulate (i.e. produce or attract) human capital because more knowledgeable and skilled employees are also more productive, and more productive workers generate economic growth and earn higher wages (e.g. Atkinson, 2002; Mirga, 2001; Rauch, 1993; Simon & Nardinelli,

2002; Glaeser & Redlick, 2009; Glaeser and Resseger, 2010). In other words, the economy is improved and governance is easier in locations that are home to large concentrations of highly educated workers because these individuals earn more, spend more, and contribute more to the general welfare in the form of taxes.

The second argument typically made in this body of literature is that attracting human capital is vital because the existence of a pool of highly skilled laborers is one of the few ways that employers, especially those in the high-tech sector, can be attracted to a given region or city (e.g. Florida 2002a, 2002b; Hansen, Ban & Huggins, 2003; Florida, Mellander & Stolarick, 2008; Gottlieb, 2011). Seeking to draw the highly educated to particular cities or regions is exemplary of what Harvey (1989) described as the “entrepreneurial” approach to urban governance that has prevailed in the U.S. since the late 1980s because doing so effectively means luring these individuals away from other cities through various forms of “place making” rather than engaging in the kinds of socially reproductive spending necessary to ensure that local residents are allowed to become highly educated themselves²⁷. Urbanist and best-selling author Richard Florida, for example, has successfully parlayed his attempts to establish a causal link between social liberalism and urban and regional economic growth into a highly influential consulting enterprise through which he has convinced leaders of declining metropolitan areas that the key to their ‘revitalization’ is to become more diverse, tolerant, and/or “bohemian” (2002a) than competing cities in order to draw away their members of the “creative class”²⁸ (Peck, 2005). Typically this means state and local government spending on things like city rebranding, subsidies for gentrification, and the development of an ‘arts and culture scene’ – monies that no doubt come out of funds meant to meet the basic needs of the non-wealthy (ibid).

The third argument typically made in this body of literature returns to the theme of entrepreneurialism, but in this case human capital accumulation is treated as a crucial precursor to the formation of a pool of innovative entrepreneurial talent capable of generating ideas, transforming these ideas into firms, and using these firms to employ locals. For some, like Berry and Glaeser (2005), the tendency for entrepreneurialism to blossom in places with high concentrations of human capital is a natural byproduct of the interaction of market forces and the capitalist space economy. Simply put, there is an agglomeration effect to knowledge work that encourages knowledge workers to cluster in certain locations rather than others, and this clustering of highly skilled workers creates an unequal geography of productivity that, in turn, explains the lack of income convergence across cities over the last four decades. For others operating under the same assumptions, such as Mathur (1999) and Florida (2002a), the implication is that regional/urban governments must foster the growth of human capital as part of a broader strategy to encourage the emergence or arrival of, and cater to the demands of, innovative individuals capable of not only creating new ideas, but also transforming them into new wealth, or risk losing out to other metro areas.

Space as a stand-in for class

Rarely, if ever, does the literature addressing human capital's influence on the geographical distribution of wealth include any discussion of the *social* distribution of wealth. It seems instead that the authors contributing to this body of scholarship assume that the wellbeing of individual residents of the regions and urban centers they discuss is tied in a more or less universal way to macro scale economic conditions in those places. In this way, the variegated well-being of individuals of all races, genders, ages, and occupations are collapsed into a homogenized dependent variable subject primarily to the trajectory of aggregate economic

output/growth in the city/region in which they reside. Implied in these essays, then, is the idea that the way to reduce social inequality is to reduce spatial inequality.

Nor does this literature include much in the way of an analysis of how capital's continual locational arbitrage and political influence shape the economic landscape, and therefore the context within which individuals and governments must make their respective human capital 'investment' decisions (Storper & Scott, 2009). Instead, these decisions are treated as largely autonomous of the influence of capital, which is cast in a largely passive role, simply responding to the geography of labor availability by moving to locations with high concentrations of human capital. Based on this framing, the appropriate policy response to an ailing urban or regional economy is to push for and create conditions favorable to the development or emergence of a highly skilled labor force. In this way, what Adamson (2009) calls the 'human capital strategy' fits snugly within the worldview imposed by neoliberalism, according to which human welfare depends on the accommodation of the demands of capital (in this case, 'human' capital). In the remainder of this paper, I argue that it is this consistency with the contemporary ideological consensus among elites in the U.S., rather than its explanatory value, that explains human capital theory's lasting popularity among politicians of both major parties, the business community, and bureaucrats who owe their positions to the former two groups.

Forging the Supply-Side Consensus

Stagflation as Crisis and Opportunity

Crisis is the lifeblood of neoliberalism. It was, in fact, the so-called 'stagflation' crisis of the 1970s that gave neoliberalism its foothold in the U.S. to begin with – both within the discipline of economics and in the realms of politics and policymaking. But as Peck (2006), Klein (2007), Harvey (2008), and others have demonstrated, the governmental hegemony of

neoliberalism wasn't natural or inevitable, but rather the result of class-interested choices made by powerfully positioned state actors when faced with uncommon but not entirely unpredictable circumstances. It was these decisions, rather than inexorable market forces or the demands of the electorate, that effectively triggered the downfall of the postwar 'demand-side'/'Keynesian' consensus in the U.S. and replaced it with the 'supply side' thinking that has assumed the mantle of common sense among policymakers ever since.

The opportunity to make these decisions began with the rapidly growing inflation that had increased from around 1% per year in the mid 1960s to the low teens per year in the late 1970s (Bryan, 2013). Prior to this period, it was widely believed by economists that unemployment and inflation were inversely related. Studying wage and employment data for the period between 1861 and 1957 in the United Kingdom, New Zealand economist A.W. Phillips (1958) found (confirmed?) that as unemployment went down, wages tended to go up (and vice versa). Because a general rise in the level of wages often leads to increased prices (because they increase effective demand), economists soon began estimating "Phillips curves" for the relationship between unemployment and the general price level rather than wages *per se*, and for countries other than the U.K. American economists Paul Samuelson and Robert Solow (1960), for example, found that apart from several anomalous periods (the Great Depression, the two world wars), a more or less stable Phillips curve could be fitted to U.S. unemployment and price growth (i.e. inflation) data in the first half of the 20th century. The significance of this supposedly stable relationship, according to Samuelson and Solow, was that it provided the federal government with, in their words, a "menu" of unemployment and inflation combinations that it could select from using policies designed to either speed up or slow down the economy. The supposed stability of the relationship between these two variables would allow the

bureaucracy to know approximately how much unemployment it would have to create in order to bring down inflation to a particular desired level during boom periods, or approximately how much inflation would grow as a result of their efforts to spur employment during busts. With this knowledge, the government could dampen the effects of the business cycle on unemployment and inflation by regularly adjusting policy to keep the intersection of the two variables towards an optimal position on the curve (i.e. targeting the middle portion of the curve nearest the origin, see Figure 3).

Figure 3 – The Phillips Curve for the U.S. estimated by Samuelson and Solow (1960)

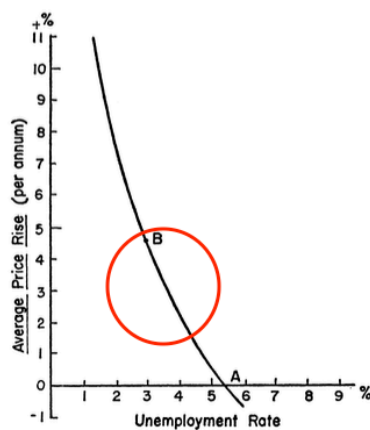


FIGURE 2

MODIFIED PHILLIPS CURVE FOR U.S.

This shows the menu of choice between different degrees of unemployment and price stability, as roughly estimated from last twenty-five years of American data.

When, during the 1970s, the U.S. (and a number of other countries) experienced high unemployment and high inflation at the same time, conservative and libertarian economists saw an opportunity to call the viability of government interventionism into question altogether. Arguing against the viability of intervention on behalf of workers, Milton Friedman (1968) had already argued that there was a “natural” rate of unemployment at any given real wage, and that government efforts to increase employment above this level would be ineffective at best, and inflationary at worst. The idea of a “natural” rate of employment is basically that, at any given real wage, there is an allegedly stable fraction of the workforce willing to go to work, and a

complementary fraction unwilling to do so (because that wage is lower than the value they place on leisure time²⁹). As the wage rate moves up, the supply of labor would allegedly increase as those previously holding back their labor in favor of leisure would begin to supply their labor to the market. However, because government efforts to stimulate the economy by inducing firms to hire more labor would also produce inflation (because of increased effective demand), the wage gains made by laborers in the tighter labor markets would be nominal rather than real (i.e. workers would be paid more, but with currency that had lost some of its value). Once workers noticed that the increased wages that induced them to supply the market with more labor were largely illusory, some would re-withdraw their labor until un/employment was back at its “natural” rate. From this, Friedman (et al) concluded that while Phillips curves might be able to explain the relationship between unemployment and inflation in the short term, the relationship between unemployment and inflation for any given economy was not consistent over the long-term.

Consistent with the neoliberal tenet that government intervention in the economy is doomed to fail because no actor or set of actors can possibly have the kind of information necessary to make effective policy in advance of this information being provided by the market itself (Harvey, 2008), Friedman’s efforts to invalidate the Phillips Curve served the broader purpose of casting doubt on positive forms of government action in general. Into the gap created by the roll back of the state’s regulatory institutions and social spending, neoliberal academics and ideologically aligned bureaucrats began rolling out negative policies they promoted as being more practicable. Though these experimental policies were cast as being specifically targeted to circumvent the unique constraints created by a stagnant economy also suffering from high

inflation (O'Connor, 2014), they have since become standard tools of economic governance in the U.S.

The first of these approaches was implemented by economist Paul Volcker during his tenure as chairman of the Federal Reserve under the Carter and Reagan administrations between 1979 and 1987. As an adherent to the “cost push” theory of inflation Volcker believed that growing labor costs were a primary driver of price increases (i.e. inflation), as firms forced to pay more for labor passed these costs on to consumers in the form of higher prices³⁰. This meant that, faced with the choice of addressing the problem of growing inflation or the problem of growing unemployment, Volcker not only prioritized fixing the former, but did so by actively working to exacerbate the latter. One of his first moves as chairman of the Fed was to significantly reduce the amount of money it artificially injected into the banking system in order to drive up interest rates. His goal in doing so was to discourage consumer spending and business investment (by making it more expensive to do these things) in order to increase unemployment, and thereby put downward pressure on wages (McCarthy, 2016). From the perspective of those for whom inflation is a bigger problem than unemployment and wage stagnation (i.e. lenders and investors), the “Volcker shock” worked. By the time he left the Federal Reserve in 1987 (to become chairman of an investment bank, of course) inflation had returned to levels common in the early 1960s (The World Bank, 2016a).

The subsequent decade presented the Federal Reserve, and Volcker’s replacement Alan Greenspan more specifically, with the opposite ‘dilemma’ to that it faced in the late 1970s and early 1980s: low inflation coupled with low unemployment (Kelton, 2005). Yet rather than using this fortuitous situation as an opportunity to pursue the Federal Reserve’s other mandate, promoting “maximum employment,” Greenspan pushed for the continued use of Volckerian

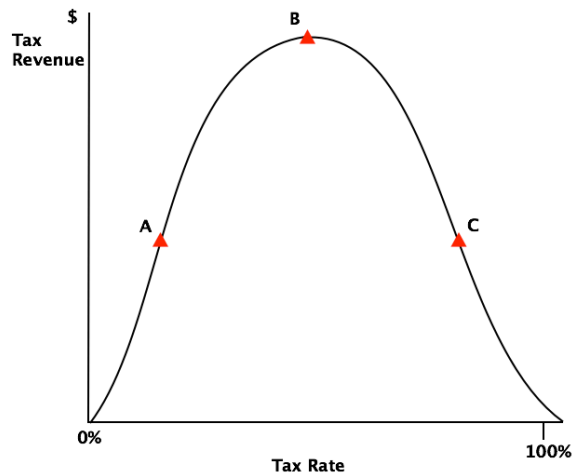
employment and wage suppression techniques. According to the minutes of a 1999 meeting of the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC - the Federal Reserve's monetary policy-making body), just seconds after conceding that the U.S. economy had "arrived at price stability by any measure," Greenspan argued for an increase in interest rates anyway because "the pool of people seeking jobs [was] continuing to erode" (Kelton, 2005, p. 25). In other words, even in the absence of inflation, Greenspan wanted to artificially slow the economy because the reserve army of labor had shrunk to a size that threatened to give labor the leverage to command wage increases.

Similarly, after holding rates as low as possible in the aftermath of the Great Recession in an attempt to spur recovery, the Federal Reserve once again began threatening to increase interest rates at the very first signs of employment and wage growth, this time under chair Janet Yellen. At the Federal Reserve's annual Jackson Hole Symposium, Yellen announced that despite the fact that inflation had settled below the FOMC's target rate of 2.0%, "the continued solid performance of the labor market" combined with the Fed's "outlook for economic activity and inflation" had strengthened the case for an increase in the federal funds rate (Yellen, 2016). Yellen's remarks, like the actions of Volcker and Greenspan, clearly indicate that while the Federal Reserve may have a "dual mandate" from Congress – namely to achieve price stability and maximum employment – it is inflation that its elite technocrats are primarily concerned with.

The other policy invention that emerged in response to stagflation was born at an informal meeting between Columbia economists Arthur Laffer and Robert Mundell, Jude Wanninski of *The Wall Street Journal*, and future vice president Dick Cheney in 1974. At this gathering, Laffer allegedly presented Cheney with a napkin on which a graph had been drawn showing two axes – the tax rate on the x-axis and total tax revenue on the y-axis – and a curve

depicting what the total tax revenue would be at any given tax rate from 0% to 100% (Bartlett, 2012). The idea was that somewhere between these extremes the curve would peak, indicating

Figure 4 – The Laffer Curve



the rate at which the government could maximize its tax revenue (Point B on Figure 5). But while the parabolic shape of the Laffer curve implies the possibility that revenue could at least occasionally be increased by increasing the tax rate (i.e. moving from Point A to Point B on Figure 5), the Laffer curve has only ever been used in practice to suggest that tax rates are too high (i.e. that the tax rate is somewhere near Point C, meaning revenue would be increased by lowering taxes) (Bartlett, 2012).

The Laffer curve was not derived from an analysis of empirical data, meaning no serious effort was made to actually determine where the U.S. was on the curve or the relationship it supposes actually exists. According to former Treasury deputy assistant secretary Bruce Bartlett (2012), conservatives in Congress simply began stating their belief that rates were on the high end of the curve, and that tax cuts would necessarily ‘pay for themselves’ in the form of higher revenues. After seeing how politically popular cutting taxes was in his home state of California following Howard Jarvis’s “tax revolt” crusade in the late 1970s, Ronald Reagan became a

supply-side convert and signed the logic of the Laffer curve into law with the eponymously titled Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, which reduced rates for the top bracket from 70% to 50%, and reduced taxes on the bottom bracket from 14% to 11%. Though these cuts actually lost revenue for the government, they were and still are considered a success by conservatives because they preceded a period of rapid accumulation at the top of the income distribution (Harvey, 2008) and continued deflation (Bartlett, 2011).

By the time the Democrats came around to the ideas that (a) limiting inflation should be the federal bureaucracy's top priority, and (b) tax cuts are economically stimulative and thus broadly beneficial, they had already embraced the libertarian idea that (c) the economy runs better when the activities and concentration of capital are unimpeded by state intervention (Stoller, 2016). Together, these policy objectives constitute the origins of what came to be known as supply-side economics. The name comes from the idea that while pursuing economic growth by propping up effective demand through social spending is inflationary and thus unsustainable, propping up *supply* by incenting businesses to expand and increase their output is both pro-growth and anti-inflationary. Taxes, regulations, and anti-trust legislation, from this point of view, were discouraging capital investment, and thus needed to be cut and relaxed, respectively, if the U.S. economy was ever to escape the quandary created by stagflation. Though developed and rationalized as solutions to the particular configuration of problems that confronted the bureaucratic elite during the stagflation crisis of the 1970s, the policymaking priorities that follow from supply side economic theory have since been ossified as inherently sound and effective by conservative intellectuals and Republican politicians. But for reasons that have very little to do with the verity of these beliefs, supply side economics also spread to other side of the aisle in the 1980s, forming a consensus among the elite of both major political parties.

A passive revolution within the Democratic Party

“We seek...not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result... To this end equal opportunity is essential, but not enough...”

-- Lyndon Johnson, 1965

“I want to build a vibrant, innovating, learning economy in which government ensures opportunities, not results, and equips everyone to win by becoming more productive.”

-- Bill Clinton, 1992

Two decades before Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) ending ‘welfare as we know it,’ his fellow Democrat Jimmy Carter (1977) delivered a “Welfare Reform Message to Congress,” in which he advocated transforming the “anti-work, anti-family” and “wasteful” system that was the legacy of the New Deal and Great Society iterations of 20th century U.S. liberalism into one that would “begin to break the welfare cycle” by ensuring that “[t]hose who can work will work.” Before Bill Clinton could reduce capital gains taxes from 28% to 20%, Jimmy Carter had reduced them from 49% to 28% (Boyd, 1987). Almost two decades before Bill Clinton deregulated the financial and telecommunications industries, Jimmy Carter had signed the Airline Deregulation Act (1978), the Depository Institutions Deregulation and Monetary Control Act (1980), the Motor Carrier Act (1980) (deregulating the trucking industry), and the Staggers Rail Act (1980) (deregulating the railroad industry).

Following Carter’s loss to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election, the next Democrat nominated to run for president, Walter Mondale (1984), vowed in his nomination acceptance speech to cut government spending and to make deficit reduction his number one priority. Lauding his own platform, Mondale noted that it contained “no defense cuts that

weaken our security; no business taxes that weaken our economy; no laundry lists that raid our Treasury.” Michael Dukakis, nominated by the Democrats to run against George HW Bush in 1988, wanted his audience at the Democratic National Convention, and the country more generally, to know that “this election isn’t about ideology. It’s about competence.” Dukakis (1988) spent the balance of his acceptance speech touting his budget balancing ability as Governor of Massachusetts, explaining his plan to reduce welfare rolls, and promising a “real” rather than “phony” “war against drugs,” seemingly trying to confirm to the electorate that he did indeed share the Republicans’ worldview and political priorities, and simply considered himself better equipped to bring them to fruition.

Choosing to interpret the successive losses of each of these candidates as a result of their excessively liberal positions (Stahl, 2016), the party that owed much of its electoral success in the 20th century to its willingness to tax and regulate corporations and its use of deficit spending to de-amplify the business cycle and soften capitalism’s edges, began to reorient itself electorally in direct opposition to these things³¹. Much of this reorientation is attributable to the political machinations of Alvin From, who served as an advisor on inflation to the Carter administration and then as executive director of the House Democratic Caucus on Party Effectiveness until starting the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) in 1985 (Hale, 1995). The goal of the DLC was, in the words of a sympathetic history written of the organization, “to move the national Democratic party, both in perception and substance, toward the center of the political spectrum in order to break the Republican hold on the White House” (ibid, p. 207). In practice, this move to the “center” meant dissociating the Democratic party from redistribution, regulation, feminism, African-Americans, Hispanics, LGBTQ groups, and (most importantly of all)

organized labor³², and rebranding it as the party of economic growth and “opportunity” (Stahl, 2016).

To rationalize the party’s move away from support for the poor and marginalized, From has sought to appropriate the descriptor “progressive” from the left in order to apply it to the socially and fiscally conservative policies that members of the DLC and their corporate funders (including DuPont, Philip Morris, Merck, and the Koch brothers [see Perlstein, 2014]) prefer. In 1989, From created the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) to give a technocratically pragmatic gloss to longstanding policy goals of the right, like welfare reform, corporate tax reductions, and industrial deregulation. As From explains in a piece published more recently in *The Atlantic* magazine, he decided to give the think tank that name not because it’s intended output would align with conventional understandings of ‘progressivism,’ but in order to make it more difficult for journalists to call this output what it was: “I was tired of having the DLC labeled as conservative. I decided to call our think tank the Progressive Policy Institute because I thought it would be harder for reporters to label it as the “conservative Progressive Policy Institute” (From, 2013).

From also began setting up state level chapters of the DLC, and recruiting southern and western governors and members of Congress to fill its leadership positions. One such figure was Bill Clinton, then governor of Arkansas, who became chairman of the DLC in 1990. Despite the aforementioned losses by Carter in 1980, Mondale in 1984, and Dukakis in 1988 – each of whom campaigned on platforms entirely consistent with the objectives of the DLC – From claims to have seen in Clinton the perfect vector through which to test the national electorate’s receptiveness to the DLC’s agenda for the ‘first’ time (From, 2013). Because Clinton won (twice), From and others within the newly dominant faction of the Democratic party considered

the rightward shift of the party over the previous decade fully validated (ibid). The subtitle to From's 2013 piece in the *Atlantic* reads: "How the New Democrats recruited a leader and saved the party after three devastating Republic routs."³³

Cheering this shift and helping to propagate the ideas of the DLC-ified Democratic party leading up to, during, and after the Clinton era was a group of journalists and intellectuals who briefly referred to themselves as "neoliberals" before becoming "New Democrats" in the late 1980s. In a 1983 piece published in the centrist magazine³⁴ he founded, *Washington Monthly*, titled "A Neoliberal's Manifesto," for example, journalist Charles Peters announced the arrival of this group by explaining that while they still believed in "liberty, justice" and "a fair chance for all," they would "no longer automatically favor unions and big government or oppose the military and big business," and were opposed to "the liberal intellectuals' contempt for religious, patriotic, and family values" (Peters, 1983). In an influential essay published in 1989 by the PPI, William Galston and Elaine Kamarck urged the Democrats to continue shedding the populist baggage of the New Deal and Great Society eras in order to focus their collective energy on transforming itself in the areas that exit polls suggested it was losing to Republicans: national defense, the Pledge of Allegiance in schools, taxes, crime, and the death penalty. Maintaining the rightward momentum of the Democratic party towards the end of and immediately following the Clinton years, other writers took to the pages of the DLC's other house publication, *Blueprint Magazine*, to make what was by then the mundane argument among New Democrats that policies spurring innovation, productivity, and opportunity should take priority over those of redistribution and government intervention (Atkinson, 2000; 2001; Galston & Kamarck, 1998; Penn, 2002), to attribute the income gains during the Clinton years to austerity, labor precarity, and deregulation (Davis & Lemieux, 2000), to advocate replacing the social safety net with skill

upgrades (Mandel, 1998; Marshall & Jarboe, 2000; Pink, 1998), and to celebrate the fact that ‘welfare reform’ had reduced welfare rolls despite the economic downturn after 9/11³⁵ (Kaus, 2002; Marshall, 2002; Mirga, 2002).

In the decade and a half since the Clinton presidency – an unmitigated triumph by New Democrat standards – the rhetoric of DLC affiliated think-tankers and politicians has increasingly reflected growing concern with the wave of populism emerging from the left and right in response to what might be called precarity creep: the spread of economic instability and vulnerability beyond the groups that have been allowed to exist in that state throughout American history. Seeking to protect their ideological hegemony from incursions on both flanks, the New Democrats have treated the popular dissatisfaction with the centrist status quo with a mix of consternation and condescension. In a white paper released by the PPI during the 2016 presidential primaries, for example, its authors attribute the outrage fueling the quasi-outsider candidacies of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump to a misdiagnosis by the hoi polloi of the causes of their stagnant wages and eroding living standards. Presumably meant to encourage the influential readers of PPI to stay the neoliberal course against the demands for fundamental change, the paper argues that what is needed is not the nativism of Trump or democratic socialism of Sanders, but rather a “forward-looking plan to unleash innovation, stimulate productive investment, groom the world’s most talented workers, and put [the] economy back on a high-growth path” (Marshall et al, 2016, p.1). An almost identical argument was made a year earlier by Delaware Governor Jack Markell (2015), and published in *The Atlantic*. In the essay, Markell suggests that “the real problem” facing workers in the U.S. isn’t corporate greed or a “rigged system,” but rather stalled economic growth, “the primary condition for reducing poverty

and want.” The solution? A mix of education, workforce training, corporate tax cuts, and financial literacy counseling, of course.

Nearly ubiquitous in the writings of the New Democrats are calls for more and better education. While globalization and/or the ‘New Economy’ have made it imperative that innovation be continuous, labor markets flexibilized, productivity growth ramped up, and any form of ‘dependency’ on the state ended, these things can only happen if the skills of the American workforce are massively upgraded. As a result, the New Democrats were early converts to the cause of ‘education reform.’ *Blueprint* served as an outlet and also a testing ground for the New Democrats’ advocacy of ‘education reform’ in the late 1990s and early 2000s, running essays boosting charter schools (e.g. Carper, 2003; From, 2004; Smith, 2003), advocating tougher academic standards and testing (e.g. Rotherham, 2001; Whitmire, 2002), and lamenting the resistance of the supposedly all-powerful teachers unions to these reforms (e.g. Rotherham, 2002; Rotherham & Levin, 2004), and an entire issue pitting teachers and their unions against public school students, titled “Adults vs. kids?.”

Also among the education reforms the New Democrats have long supported is value-added modeling (VAM), a method developed by statistician William Sanders for determining an individual teacher’s contribution to the learning of an individual student by comparing the current year test scores of each student to their scores on the same subject test in the prior year. In 1999, *Blueprint* ran a brief essay of excerpts compiled from interviews with and speeches by Sanders explaining his methods and preliminary findings. The title of the piece, “Teachers, teachers, teachers!” speaks to the appeal of value-added modeling for the New Democrats: the cause of the achievement gap isn’t poverty, per-pupil spending, or even neighborhood quality, but rather the workers in one of the few remaining heavily-unionized occupations in the U.S.

With the passage of No Child Left Behind Act several years later (2001), states and districts across the country began using VAM procedures in order to help isolate individual teachers failing to help schools make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) towards the Act's requirement that 100% of all students be proficient in all tested subjects by 2014 (Barkan, 2011). Though rightly associated with the now infamous NCLB, the AYP concept was actually first deployed in the Improving America's Schools Act, signed into law in 1994 by Bill Clinton.

The Human Capital Narrative: Education Reform as the Supply-Side Stand-In for Redistribution

Two years after signing the Improving America's Schools Act, which increased federal spending on primary and secondary public schools by roughly \$2.5 billion per year, Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, dramatically reducing welfare benefits and making them much more difficult to access (Shaefer & Edin, 2013). Similarly, five years after announcing the Race to the Top program, through which state departments of education were allowed to compete for a share of \$4.35 billion in federal stimulus money in exchange for continuing the standardized testing based punitive measures of NCLB, adopting national curriculum standards, and lifting caps on charter schools, Barack Obama signed a Farm Bill cutting \$8.7 billion from the federal food stamp program through 2024 (Resnikoff, 2014). In each case, transfer programs designed to immediately mitigate the worst effects of poverty and material deprivation were effectively replaced by speculative, long-term investments in educational attainment. Importantly, however, the 'investments' made in education in place of welfare/safety net spending often come in the form of procedural changes and raised expectations, rather than additional funding. That is, human capital accumulation is often merely cast an expected consequence of the educational reforms imposed by Democrats at the federal, state, and district level (e.g. lifting charter school caps, implementing tougher teacher

accountability measures, requiring the use of nationally standardized curricular materials, emphasis on STEM curriculum) that do not necessarily come with additional financial support.

The aim of this section has been to provide background and context for this change in priorities. To summarize, an emergent faction within the Democratic party became its dominant faction by convincing the rest of the party that retaking the White House from the Republicans would require a move to the center (-right), which was alleged to be the only thing would allow them to regain the crucial middle-class white vote, who wanted the government to spend more on defense and police and less on welfare³⁶ (e.g. From, 2013; Galston & Kamarck, 1989). This put the Democrats in an awkward position. They needed a way to distinguish themselves electorally from the Republican party while at the same time campaigning on what were essentially Republican approaches to crime, foreign policy, and the economy. More specifically, the Democrats needed a cause to rally around that the Republicans could be shown to have neglected, but that did not violate the tenets of the supply-side consensus that had developed between the elites of both major parties as did the Welfare State. With Ronald Reagan having promised to eliminate the Department of Education as a presidential candidate in 1980, and Republicans generally seen as hostile to the very idea of public education (Rotherham, 2002), the Democrats turned (if not always in name) to the logic of human capital and what became its corollary, education reform.

Recall from the second section of this paper that human capital theory assumes that there are no social classes; the social field is instead imagined as a level plain occupied by differentially ambitious auto-entrepreneurs. Drawing on this perspective, the New Democrats began to cast inequality as the product of individualized deficits, and those in need as being pathologically ‘dependent’ (Fraser, 1993; Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Peck, 1998a; 1998b;

Theodore, 2001; Schram, 2010). This has had a lasting effect on the liberal imagination. As inequality became the socially just outcome of unequal initiative, New Democrat thinkers, bureaucrats, and politicians began to see poverty as less of a problem than the chance that government spending would indulge the indolent. Responsible governance thereby became less about ensuring a floor was placed under living standards than about putting caps on financial assistance (Peck, 2001). This meant that the proper role of the state was not to provide tangible benefits to people but rather to create a context in which those proving themselves worthy of material wellbeing can prosper, or, in Bill Clinton's words, "to ensure opportunities, not results...".

Recall also that human capital theory considers the knowledge and skills one acquires through on-the-job training and/or schooling as forms of return generating wealth comparable to conventional forms of capital. Thus, by enacting reforms that would supply the disadvantaged with human capital, the Democrats could position themselves as not entirely abandoning the wellbeing of its historical base to the vagaries of the market. Education reform has thereby become a kind of alchemy through which reconfigurations of policy are construed as investments in poor communities that are equally formidable weapons against unmet need as a robust safety net would otherwise be. In other words, by turning to the logic of human capital, the New Democrats found a non-redistributive (free-distributive?), capital friendly alternative to the Welfare State to serve as the centerpiece of their approach to economic inequality³⁷.

Human Capital in the 21st Century

"There is very little evidence that labor's share in national income has increased significantly in a very long time: "nonhuman" capital seems almost as indispensable in

the twenty-first century as it was in the eighteenth or nineteenth, and there is no reason why it may not become even more so.”

-- Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century* (2014, p. 22)

The reasoning behind the Democrats’ embrace of education reform as the social justice skeleton key goes something like this: economic growth is the prerequisite for broadly shared prosperity, productivity growth is the prerequisite for economic growth, continual augmentation of the knowledge and skills of the workforce are the prerequisite for productivity growth, and massive improvements in the quality of public school teachers and curriculum are prerequisites for adequate augmentation of the knowledge and skills of the U.S. workforce – thus, education reform is a necessary precondition of improved living standards and poverty reduction.

Fortunately, there are readily available statistics with which to test the validity of this chain of assumptions.

Given that the entire chain seems to rest on the assumption that U.S. schools are currently underperforming, one might start by asking, as renowned education reformer George W. Bush once did, “is our children learning?” According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (2016), high school drop out rates have fallen for all race/ethnicity groups since 1990, and the test scores earned by students of all ages (9, 13, and 17 year olds), sexes, and races/ethnicities tested on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (a nationally administered set of standardized math and reading tests) have increased gradually, but almost continuously, since 1978 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Enrollment at 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities has increased since 1990 for men and women; white, black, Hispanic, and Asian students; and students from low-, middle- and high-income families (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). As a result, the percentage of the U.S.

population over 25 years old who possess at least a Bachelor's Degree has reached an all-time high (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The rate at which Americans have earned college degrees has grown so fast, in fact, that it has outpaced demand for college educated workers (Beaudry, Green & Sand, 2013; Shierholz, 2013; Vedder, Denhart, & Robe, 2013; Abel, Deitz & Su, 2014; Cappelli, 2014). This is true even within the supposedly tight labor market for scientists and engineers ('STEM' workers). Contrary to popular belief, the supply of science and engineering degree holders has exceeded labor market demand for scientists and engineers for roughly two decades (Butz et al, 2004; Lowell & Salzman, 2007; Lowell et al, 2009; Charette, 2013; Salzman et al, 2013; Weissman, 2013). This data seems to invalidate the widespread assumption that U.S. schools are failing to provide the U.S. economy with an adequate supply of educated/skilled labor.

Still, a skeptic could respond that, yes, educational attainment has increased over the last few decades, but not enough for the U.S. to outcompete competing countries where educational attainment is increasing more rapidly. But even a cursory review of the commonly used metrics makes clear that the U.S. economy as a whole has fared quite well over the last few decades. According to the World Bank, the U.S.'s GDP and GDP per capita have also grown more or less continuously for at least the last half-century, and have each more than doubled in just the last three decades. While the rapid growth of East and South Asian economies have led to a slight decline in the U.S.'s share of world output over the last few decades – from 26% in 1990 to 24% in 2015 – the U.S.'s share of the GDP generated by all countries classified as 'High Income' by the World Bank has increased since the early 1980s, from roughly 32% in 1990 to 38% in 2015 (authors calculations based on World Bank, 2016b). This is largely a product of the fact that labor productivity in the U.S., measured as the dollar value of output divided by the number of

hours worked, has grown almost continuously over the last half century, and has been the highest or second highest in the world over the last decade³⁸ (The Conference Board, 2016). As a result of these productivity increases, corporate profits are currently hovering near all-time highs (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2016).

The preceding paragraphs seem to support (but not quite confirm) the contention that increasing educational attainment generates economic growth. Yet the chain connecting educational attainment and *social justice* falls apart when one considers how this growth has been distributed. Between 1980 and 2012, the share of all income in the U.S. going to the top 10% of income receivers grew by more than a third, from just under 35% to more than 50%; the share going to the top 1% more than doubled, from just over 10% to roughly 22%; and the share going to the top 0.01% more than quadrupled, from approximately 1.3% to nearly 5.5% (Saez, 2012 [Table A3]). Over the same period, wages for the bottom 90% of earners in the U.S. workforce have barely budged (Bivens et al, 2014; Mishel, Gould & Bivens, 2015)³⁹, and the percentage of the U.S. population living at or below the poverty line has actually *increased* slightly⁴⁰ (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In sum, neither the unprecedented growth in the educatedness and productivity of U.S. laborers, nor the virtually unparalleled expansion of the U.S. economy have been sufficient to make the distribution of the social product more equitable or humane. The question thus becomes: what accounts for the discrepancy between the human capital narrative and empirical reality? The following offers two overlapping answers to this question.

‘Capital’ is an inaccurate label for knowledge and skills

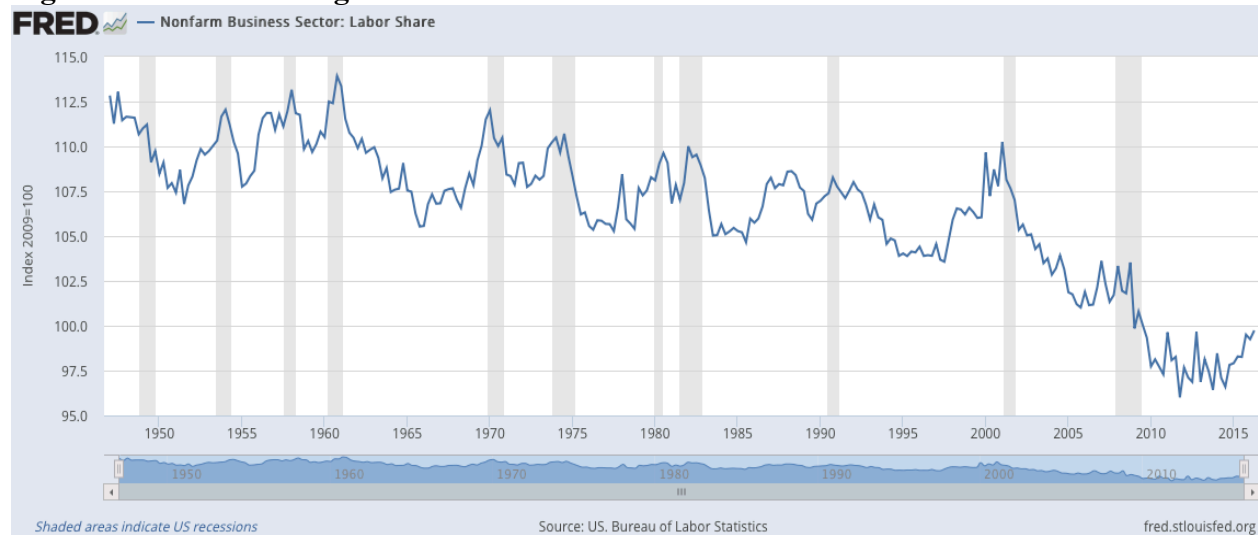
As former World Bank chief economist Branko Milanovic (2015) has pointed out, what

economists like to refer to as “human capital” is qualitatively very different from other forms of capital. Unlike financial capital, for example, human capital requires its holder to actually work for a return. This means that stocks and employable skills both returning \$50,000 per year do not, in fact, provide their holders with equal returns, because from the \$50,000 earned by working one would need to subtract the disutility and/or opportunity cost of having to spend time and effort actually working for it. In other words, because people tend to prefer leisure to work, the \$50,000 earned passively through ownership of financial instruments is superior to the \$50,000 earned by laboring for it.

Contrary to the narrative promoted by human capital theorists, human capital is not only qualitatively *different from* “non-human” capital, it is thoroughly *subordinated to* non-human capital. That is to say, bearers of human capital can only expect a return on their human capital if non-human capital agrees to provide them with an opportunity to do so in the form of a job. As would be expected, given increasing automation and the disproportionate growth of non-labor intensive sectors of the U.S. economy (e.g. finance), demand for highly skilled and/or highly educated labor in the U.S. simply has not kept up with supply. Contrary to the rhetoric of the education reform movement, the most common type of job being created by the contemporary U.S. economy requires little education, and promises low-wages. In its Occupational Outlook Handbook for 2014, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projected that only five of the top twenty fastest growing jobs⁴¹ in U.S. between 2014 and 2024 would require a Bachelor’s degree or higher, and just seven would require any education at all beyond a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). Of these twenty jobs, thirteen paid annual wages in 2015 that were less than the median personal income of all workers that year, \$38,152 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

As a result of the insufficient demand for highly-skilled/highly-educated workers, employment is becoming increasingly precarious for workers at all levels of education (Shierholz, 2013), and workers have had little leverage with which to force employers to actually pay them a wage commensurate with their productivity. According to Bivens et al (2014), labor productivity grew eight times faster than wage growth between 1979 and 2013. As a result, the labor share of income has declined significantly since 1980, and particularly sharply over the last 15 years.⁴²

Figure 5 – The Declining Labor Share Over the Last 70 Years in the U.S.



(Source: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2016)

Even workers trained for the supposedly high-demand STEM fields have seen minimal wage growth over the last few decades (Cappelli, 2014; Salzman, Kuehn & Lowell, 2013; Schmitt & Jones, 2012), and are increasingly taking jobs that do not require a college degree (Beaudry, Green & Sand, 2013). There are several reasons for this. First, in the wake of the so-called ‘shareholder revolution’ in the early 1980s, corporations began to switch from what Lazonick calls a “retain and reinvest” strategy, according to which firms sought to reinvest profits in expanding productive capacity and attracting/retaining highly skilled labor, to a “downsize and disburse” strategy through which profits (and sometimes even borrowed money

[Mason, 2015]) are quickly disbursed to shareholders in the form of stock buybacks or dividends, without regard for the long-term consequences for the firm (Lazonick, 2014). Second, exploitation of the H1B visa program has allowed firms in the high-tech sector to replace U.S. workers with workers from lower-wage countries (Salzman, Kuehn & Lowell, 2013), who have little recourse against wage theft or abusive work conditions by virtue of the fact that the domestic employers can revoke the visa at any time (Wasser, 2015; Werman, 2013). In 2015, for example, 250 IT workers at Disney were laid off, but only after being required to train their replacements who were brought in by an India-based outsourcing firm (Preston, 2015). Another obstacle preventing workers from being able to command wages commensurate with their productivity has been the concentration and centralization of capital via the wave of mergers and acquisitions that have taken place recently (Stoller, 2016), resulting in less competition for labor in many industries and thus, less of a need among the remaining firms to use higher benefits and wages to attract workers (The White House, 2016). In a number of non-monopsonic industries, firms have been successful at suppressing wages through informal collusion informal, and/or by using instruments like ‘non-compete’ clauses, stipulations slipped into employment contracts that ban workers from accepting employment with another firm in the same industry for a specified period of time after concluding their employment with their current employer. According to Starr et al (2016), approximately 28 million workers in the U.S. are currently employed under this type of agreement⁴³.

In each case mentioned here, capital has outflanked the bearers of ‘human capital’ in the struggle over how the social product will be distributed, and quantitative changes to the U.S.’s human capital stock have proven insufficient to the task of reversing, or even limiting, the material inequality this imbalance of power creates. ‘Investments’ in human capital are thus an

ineffective strategy against the social ills they are supposed to address. But by making inequality appear to be a product of individual choice and allowing the Democratic party to appear to be actively engaged on that front, such a strategy is a highly effective means of crowding out discussion of approaches that would call for a greater material contribution to the social welfare from the elite.

The capitalist production of space militates against socio-spatial equality and equilibrium

A second, and supplemental, explanation for the discrepancy between the human capital narrative and empirical reality centers on the spatiality of state spending on social reproduction. In the case of conventional state welfare spending, resources meant to blunt the effects of poverty and material deprivation go directly (or almost directly) to the people who will use them, meaning individual human recipients of this form of aid realize all, or at least most, of the utility it provides. Food stamps, for example, are provided directly to individuals and thereby immediately and directly provide their intended recipients with access to food. State ‘investments’ in education reform, though regularly cast as a tactic for reducing poverty and mitigating inequality, are, by contrast, directed to schools or school districts. Thus to the extent that state ‘investments’ in educational improvement can be considered investments at all, they are directed first to spaces/places, and only indirectly, potentially, and eventually to those in need. The assumption underlying education reform as an anti-poverty strategy is that better schools will provide their attendees with better education, which they will then parlay into access to more remunerative employment upon graduation (whether from high school or college). Similarly, the human capital strategy for economic development advocated in the 1960s by Theodore Schultz and more recently by the likes of Richard Florida is directed at cities, regions, and countries, rather than those in need who happen live in these places. The argument made by

Florida and others is that drawing highly productive people to an area leads to higher average wages, which is a sound indicator of widely shared prosperity.

The problem with directing resources to places rather than individuals in pursuit of social and/or spatial balance is that capitalism is inimical to the equitable distribution of resources both within and between places. As demonstrated above, there are no mechanisms inherent to the capitalist mode of production that prevent a given pool of resources collected in a given location from becoming highly concentrated among a very small portion of its population. Increases in educational attainment have proven incapable of undoing capitalism's tendency toward concentration. Using its global reach and unique access to government operatives, capital has devised a variety of means of denying workers the leverage to command wages that rise in tandem with their productivity (let alone accurately reflect the preponderance of their contribution to the total social product), ensuring that firms capture a large share of any returns that are generated from the state's educational investments.

Similarly, the human capital strategy of regional economic development founders on its disregard of capitalism's reliance on, and purposively active role in producing, uneven development (Harvey, 2003; 2007; Smith, 1979; 2008). Capital, as any neoclassical economist would admit, is drawn to places where the potential for profit is greatest. Typically, locations with the highest potential for profit are locations where productive inputs (e.g. land, raw materials, labor) are cheap in comparison to the prices of these inputs in relatively developed locations. Thus, capital tends to move towards locations where input prices, including wages, are low. As investment in a given location grows, however, competition for these resources grows, raising the price of production (or the provision of services), and reducing profitability. As a result, capital as a whole is more or less continually on the move in its search for locations

with cheap inputs. The significance of all of this for the present discussion is that, to the extent that state investment in education in a given location (or any other event) does actually produce higher wages for its residents, it likely accelerates the arrival of the point at which firms choose to abandon that area for a cheaper alternative.⁴⁴

Some human capitalists would counter that the primary benefit of accumulating human capital in a given location is that it creates fertile ground for the emergence of entrepreneurs, the idea being that, in this way, firms won't need to be attracted from beyond the region (e.g. Berry and Glaeser, 2005; Florida, 2002a; Mathur, 1999). The primary problem with this strategy is that the majority of new businesses eventually fail – half within 5-6 years (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2012) – making an individual's decision to start a business a risky one. This risk is heightened for those without auxiliary wealth to fall back on, especially if they happen to be a resident of the kind of economically stagnant areas that this strategy is typically suggested for. Another weakness of this strategy is its unrealistic assumption that highly-skilled and/or educated people can be incented to move to a new region or metropolitan area – whether through the creation of a “bohemian” and/or “tolerant” urban environment (e.g. Florida, 2002) or with charter schools and low regulation (e.g. Glaeser, 2011; 2013) – prior to securing employment there. The ideal agent in much of the human capital literature simply picks a location that possesses the physical, socio-cultural, or institutional amenities they value most, picks up and moves there, and starts a business (Peck, 2016; Storper & Scott, 2009).

Perhaps the most damning indictment of the human capital-based approach to urban and/or regional economic development comes from an ongoing research project at the University of Toronto's Martin Prosperity Institute, the preliminary results of which show that once housing costs are factored in, those living in cities with high concentrations of ‘creative class’ workers

but not belonging to the creative class themselves – around 2/3 of the U.S. workforce – end up worse off economically than if they had lived in a ‘non-creative’ city. In other words, city governments that have successfully produced or attracted a “creative class” have done so to the detriment of more than half of their residents⁴⁵. The lead investigator of this study, who will soon be releasing a book on the very same topic, is none other than Richard Florida (2013).

Conclusion

“I guess the trouble was that we didn’t have any self-admitted proletarians. Everyone was a temporarily embarrassed capitalist.”

-- John Steinbeck, *A Primer on the 30s* (1960)

The primary goal of this paper has been to reveal the imprint of historical circumstance and ideological fealty on the widespread idea that more and better education is, as education reform booster Bill Gates put it, “the best way to solve poverty” (Gates, 2011). I have attempted to show that this idea – what I have several times called ‘the human capital narrative’ – initially gained momentum in the 1980s as an emergent faction within the Democratic party sought a policy focus with which to distinguish itself electorally from the Republicans while simultaneously adopting most of the latter’s economic priorities and objectives – namely, suppressing inflation and eliminating impediments to capital accumulation. Education reform was well suited to this task because while making ‘investments’ in human capital in low-income neighborhoods could be construed as a strategy for addressing economic inequality (in place of conventional forms of social spending), it would not be tangibly or downwardly redistributive⁴⁶, and would provide capital with potentially more productive labor. Though no longer facing the dilemmas posed by stagflation, the policy priorities of the Democrats since Carter suggest that

the ideas that emerged in response to stagflation – including its preference for education reform over welfare spending – were permanently ensconced.

A secondary goal of this paper has been to suggest that liberal loyalty to the human capital narrative in the face of its failure to achieve its implied objectives can be explained by its consistency with what the political and economic elite like to believe about the legitimacy of social hierarchies and causes of spatial unevenness. First, by blaming poverty and income inequality on the alleged failure of U.S. educational institutions to supply low-income, black, and Hispanic students with adequate quantities of human capital, and attributing the geographic unevenness of the economy to the alleged failure of particular locations to produce or attract adequate quantities of human capital, together help obscure capitalism's fundamental reliance on inequality and instability. Second, by promoting individual choice and agency as the root causes of inequality and instability, the human capital narrative obscures the influences of structure and unequal power relations. And relatedly, by casting us all as human capitalists – autoentrepreneurs navigating a world where one's income is determined by the foresight and diligence with which they make investments in themselves, rather than differentially wide range of opportunities available to them for selling their labor – the human capital narrative rhetorically levels the social playing field, obscuring the extent to which “non-human” capital has organized society in its own favor.

Swapping out directly redistributive mechanisms with training meant to outfit young people for their eventual entry into the labor market will not eliminate social or spatial inequity, because markets – absent countervailing pressures by coercive state power – are little more than constructs that legitimize the funneling of socially produced wealth into ever greater concentrations. What is needed, therefore, is not to transform public school students into nascent

(human) capitalists, but to ensure that they leave school with an understanding of the constraints that elite consensus places around any effort to seek a more just distribution of wealth and wellbeing.

¹ “Liberal” and “liberalism” are difficult to define with any precision, for a number of reasons. One problem is that the term’s meaning varies by geographical and historical context. The liberalism of 19th century Europe meant something very different from what it meant in the U.S. in the middle of the 20th century, for example. The same problem is present even if one zeroes in on the last half of the 20th century in U.S., as the set of principles, preferences, and/or policymaking priorities regularly associated with liberalism have changed in line with the shifting priorities of the Democratic Party (the institution that has ostensibly sought to valorize and implement “liberal” policies) over this period. Since the 1950s, American liberals and Democratic politicians have, generally speaking, staked out a progressively left position on a variety of social issues (e.g. LGBTQ rights, women’s rights) while moving right on most economic issues (e.g. the Welfare State, labor unions, regulation of the private sector). As a result, liberalism in the U.S. has functioned less like an ideology than a flexible rhetorical composite, the only consistent feature of which has been its use as a means of signaling electoral opposition to the Republican Party. It is this desiccated sense of the term that I refer to in this paper.

² An argument could easily be made that the government’s limited use of laws, redistribution, diplomacy, and interventionism have indeed failed to adequately address discrimination, inequality, insecurity, and volatility. The point here, however, is that education now seems to be regarded by Democratic politicians and bureaucrats as more powerful than all of these tactics combined.

³ i.e. thoroughly overblown

⁴ Summers has also served as the President of Harvard University, as Secretary of the Treasury under Bill Clinton, and, after a stint as a managing partner at the hedge fund D.E. Shaw, as Director of the United States National Economic Council under Barack Obama.

⁵ Lest one should assume that this comment reflects a kind of feminist streak within Summers, he previously downplayed the role gendered discrimination played in the underrepresentation of women in academic science departments by arguing that innate cognitive/psychological differences between men and women were instead to blame (see Jaschik, 2005). Given Summers’s belief in a gendered divergence in intellectual ability, perhaps it was not by chance that the percentage of tenure track appointments offered to women dropped from 36% to 13% during his tenure as President of Harvard (Goldenberg, 2005).

⁶ Like “liberalism,” a precise definition of “neoliberalism” is difficult to establish, as its meaning, too, is space/time dependent (Glickman, 2016). That said, drawing on Harvey (2008) and Foucault (2010), I use the term here to refer to an ideology that prioritizes individualism over the social good, views competition as a guarantor of progress and wellbeing, and conceptualizes its ideal state as having as its sole functions the creation and maintenance of the otherwise ‘free’ markets through which subjects must acquire all of their needs and wants. The significance of the term for the purposes of this paper is that although these preferences in each case are thoroughly political and clearly biased in favor of the powerful, its adherents present neoliberalism as a disinterested, technocratic approach to distributing of rights and responsibilities in accordance with the goals of maximal economic efficiency and human freedom.

⁷ In his 1990 State of the Union address, for example, George H.W. Bush promised to “invest” in “capital of all kinds,” including “intellectual capital” and “human capital,” in order to ensure that “the American worker” remains “the most productive worker in the world.” When Bush’s single term in office came to an end, the human capital baton was passed to the Clinton Administration, whose Department of Education published a paper claiming that behind his campaign promise to “put people first” was a “human capital agenda” centered on “investing” in the kinds of education and training students would need to compete in increasingly globalized labor markets (Smith &

Scoll, 1995). Referring to the No Child Left Behind Act, then-Secretary of Education Rod Paige explained in a 2003 speech that “[d]espite all of the priorities competing for our tax dollars, President [George W.] Bush has continued to invest historic levels of funding in education” in order to close the “achievement gap” (Paige, 2003). In his 2014 State of the Union address, Barack Obama described early childhood education as “one of the best investments [the government] can make” (2014).

⁸ When one ‘invests’ in their own education, it is understood that they are hoping that the salary/wages they will be paid as a result, minus the cost of receiving that education, will exceed what their salary/wages would have been otherwise. But although college graduates currently tend to have higher incomes than those without a college degree (Abel & Deitz, 2014) the costs of receiving higher education are rapidly increasing while the incomes of those with a bachelors degree have more or less leveled off over the last several decades (ibid). At the same time, the economy’s capacity to fully employ the knowledge and skills of college graduates has fallen sharply over the last decade and a half (Beaudry et al, 2013; Abel et al, 2014). As of 2013, nearly half of all college graduates in the U.S. were employed in jobs not requiring a college degree (Vedder et al, 2013).

⁹ The Google N-gram viewer is a search engine that allows users to chart the frequency with which words or phrases appear in books published between 1500 and 2008. Figure 2 illustrates the frequency with which “welfare reform” (red line) and “human capital” (blue line) appeared books published between 1983 and 2008. The similarity between the curves suggests that the popularity of the two terms followed a similar trajectory.

¹⁰ By “acritical” here I refer to those who take for granted the dominance of capitalist imperatives over social interaction and the distribution of wealth, and who, when proposing solutions to social problems, are constrained by their unwillingness or inability to imagine radical alternatives to what currently exists.

¹¹ The term ‘market income’ refers to all income an individual receives minus government transfers (i.e. money from investments or waged work).

¹² If ‘abilities’ are distributed normally, and incomes are a product of ‘abilities,’ the distribution of income should be normal as well (i.e. the distribution of income should resemble the curve on the left). Instead, Mincer noticed that incomes were positively skewed (resembling the curve on the right), suggesting that the top earners (those on the far right tail of the curve) were receiving incomes beyond what their natural abilities would have commanded on their own.

¹³ Mincer would later write a book focusing on schooling as an investment in human capital, in which he relaxed many of the assumptions his reliance on rational choice theory required him to make in this paper. For example, in the concluding chapter of the book, he noted that subsequent research would need to take into account the role that employers (as demanders of labor) play in determining the returns one gets on their investment in education (i.e. wages), rather than assuming that returns would be constant across varying labor market conditions. Mincer also conceded that “ability and opportunity,” rather than individual decisions alone, “determine the distribution of human capital” (1974, p. 138).

¹⁴ The equation described here is often referred to as the Solow Growth Model, after the economist Robert Solow, who introduced it in a paper published in 1957. In this essay, Solow wrote the growth accounting equation as $Q = F(K, L, t)$, with Q representing total output, K representing capital, L representing labor, and t representing “technical change.”

¹⁵ Solow himself conceded on the first page of the essay introducing his model of growth accounting that the residual variable would be a “shorthand expression for *any kind of shift* in the production function,” including “all sorts of things,” of which “improvements in the education of the labor force” was only one form (Solow, 1957, p. 312, emphasis original).

¹⁶ Neoclassical economic theory holds that workers are compensated according to their productivity. Harvard economist Greg Mankiw explains it this way: “Economic theory says that the wage a worker earns, measured in units of output, equals the amount of output the worker can produce. Otherwise, competitive firms would have an incentive to alter the number of workers they hire, and these adjustments would bring wages and productivity in

line. If the wage were below productivity, firms would find it profitable to hire more workers. This would put upward pressure on wages and, because of diminishing returns, downward pressure on productivity. Conversely, if the wage were above productivity, firms would find it profitable to shed labor, putting downward pressure on wages and upward pressure on productivity. The equilibrium requires the wage of a worker equaling what that worker can produce” (2006). Actual data on productivity and wages refute this theory of course, but it remains highly influential within the discipline of economics (see Powell, paper C).

¹⁷ Weisbrod did not bother to justify his estimates of the number of women who only work because of the childcare provided by schools, nor their estimated earnings using any kind of empirical data. A footnote simply states that these numbers are “plausible and even conservative.” (Note 31, p. 117)

¹⁸ This is a term economists use to describe the impacts of a transaction on individuals not directly involved in the transaction.

¹⁹ This idea probably sounded much more radical in the decade it was first uttered, given that the share of higher education costs covered by the state was significantly higher then.

²⁰ As a graduate student at the University of Chicago, Becker took courses with Friedman, who encouraged him to pursue social questions using neoclassical economic theory (Teixeira, 2014). Becker’s dissertation studied discrimination as a cost incurred by individuals and firms seeking to accommodate their social biases (e.g. against hiring African Americans, putting women in positions of authority within the workplace, purchasing goods from Hispanic businesses, etc.), and argued that the magnitude of these costs varied with other social variables, such as the relative sizes of ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ populations, legislation, and the level of ‘minority’ access to education (Becker, 1993; Heckman, 2011). For this and his subsequent work applying neoclassical economic theory to social issues such as crime, family dynamics, and drug addiction, Freidman would describe Becker as “the greatest social scientist who has lived and worked in the last half [of the 20th] century” (see Heckman, 2011).

²¹ Consistent with human capital theory’s narrowly economic conception of education, Becker defined the school as “an institution specializing in the production of training, as distinct from a firm that offers training in conjunction with the production of goods” (p. 51).

²² Becker’s finding that the return to college for urban white males tended to be higher than the return to non-whites, women, and people in rural areas has, of course, been far less influential.

²³ In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault argues that neoliberalism represents “a return to homo oeconomicus” (p. 225). He then specifies that beyond the consistently rational, optimizing, self-interested agent of classical economic theory, the *homo oeconomicus* of neoliberalism is also “an entrepreneur of himself” (p. 226).

This is a slight paraphrasing of how Foucault described neoliberalism’s ideal subject in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2010, p. 226).

²⁴ This lecture was included as the first chapter after the Introduction in the 3rd edition of *Human Capital*.

²⁵ At this panel, Becker claimed that the overarching message of his work on human capital had been that the U.S. ought to “invest” more in people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The notion that education represents an investment in people is consistent with the logic, put into practice by the Democrats, that more and better schooling can serve as a stand-in for redistribution.

²⁶ The Preface to the 3rd edition of *Human Capital*, published in 1994, opens by talking about how George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton both used the phrase “investing in human capital” while campaigning for the presidency in 1992.

²⁷ Harvey refers to this as urban entrepreneurialism’s tendency to “focus much more closely on the political economy of place than of territory” (1989, p. 7).

²⁸ In a 2008 paper with Charlotta Mellander and Kevin Stolarick, Florida defined the creative class as those working in the following Bureau of Labor Statistics-designated occupational fields: “computer and math occupations; architecture and engineering; life, physical and social science; education, training and library positions; arts and design work and entertainment, sports and media occupations—as well as other professional and knowledge work occupations including management occupations, business and financial operations, legal positions, healthcare practitioners, technical occupations and high end sales and sales management” (p. 625). These 10 categories are just under half of the 22 official categories recognized by the BLS, and, in 2015, workers in these fields made up approximately 40% of the U.S. workforce (author’s calculations based on occupational data downloaded from: <http://www.bls.gov/oes/tables.htm>). The breadth of this category invites suspicion that there is some semantic/rhetorical (as opposed to intellectual) utility that comes from giving its occupants the narrow-sounding label of “creative” as opposed to using the broader sounding label of “white collar.”

²⁹ As Harvey (2008) points out, neoliberals conveniently assume that all unemployment is volitional.

³⁰ The alternative theory of inflation is known as demand-pull, and holds that inflation happens when the effective demand for goods exceeds supply, driving up prices.

³¹ Many pundits have argued that the Democrats’ troubles actually go back to the 1972 presidential elections, when Democratic Senator George McGovern, whose opposition to the Vietnam War and support of a universal basic income allowed the political center and right to paint him as a left-wing ‘extremist,’ was defeated in the popular vote by 23 percentage points to Republican Richard Nixon. Over the last two decades, the center and right have sought to paint any politician to the left of the center-right as “the next McGovern,” candidates even appearing to stray from the Washington Consensus are portrayed by the state elite as too far to the left for the American public, and thus destined to doom the Democrats to a prolonged period of electoral marginalization (see, for example Abraham, 2003; From & Reed, 2003; Novak, 2008; Plotkin, 2015; Vennochi, 2003).

³² From, on this point, remarked that “Labor’s views are important, but we’re not going to labor and adopt their ideas, and go to gay, lesbian, black, Hispanic, Jewish caucuses” (Stahl, 2016).

³³ This is an interesting way to put it, given the massive losses the Democrats have suffered in the wake of Clintonism. New Democrats Al Gore and John Kerry lost to George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004, respectively, and Democrats have had majorities in the Senate for just 12 of the 24 years, and in the House for only 6 of 24 years, since 1992. Democrats have had a majority of state governorships for only five years over the same period, and have lost more than 919 seats in state legislatures over between 2010 and 2016 alone (see http://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/Elections/Legis_Control_2016_Nov7.pdf and http://www.ncsl.org/documents/statevote/legiscontrol_2009.pdf). Despite these losses, there is no movement underway to guide the party back into alignment with the quasi social democratic goals of the New Deal or Great Society iterations of 20th century U.S. liberalism, as the party establishment’s all-hands-on-deck effort to defeat the moderately left candidacy of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders during the Democratic presidential primary has made clear (Bycoffe, 2016; Peters, 2016).

³⁴ On its website, *Washington Monthly* describes itself as “listened to by insiders and willing to take on sacred cows—liberal and conservative.” Particularly relevant to this paper, the same ‘About’ section of the *Washington Monthly* website explains “we offer innovative solutions: how to get the best people to work for the government and how to get the best government for the people; how to get teachers who can teach and social workers who can make welfare reform work.” (see <http://washingtonmonthly.com/about/>)

³⁵ Given that this is precisely what the PRWORA mandated, these celebrations are on a par with one gazing, full of pride, at a brick on the ground, having just dropped it there, and exclaiming, “it worked!”

³⁶ The middle-class whites the New Democrats were attempting to woo back into the party were not motivated by the desire to see reductions in welfare spending *per se*. According to historian Donna Murch (2016), the DNC commissioned a series of focus groups with white voters in an attempt to understand why they had turned away from the Democrats in the 1980s. The key finding was that whites in both the south and north associated the Democrats with “giving white tax money to black and poor people.” Embarrassed by the explicitly racist nature of this and

other findings, Democratic National Committee chair Ron Kirk ordered all copies of the study destroyed before they could be published, despite spending \$250,000 to have it done. A follow-up study conducted in 1992 produced similar findings. So rather than attempting to dispel, or even challenge, these beliefs, the New Democrats decided to cater to them for political gain by campaigning on promises to end welfare and get tough on crime (ibid).

³⁷ The Democrats' focus on education reform as the key to social equality has persisted beyond the Clinton years, alongside its centrist policy orientation. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act incorporated many of the ideas New Democrats had pushed in Blueprint magazine, and the Act passed the House with the support of 95% of Democratic representatives, and the Senate with the support of all but two Democratic members. The Obama administration's educational policies are largely a continuation of those of Bush and Clinton (see Paper 2), and have been positioned by Obama and his surrogates as central to the effort to address rising inequality (e.g. Duncan, 2010; 2011; 2013; Obama, 2012b; 2013). During the 2012 presidential contest, Obama administration chronicler Jonathan Alter remarked that "liberal" and "conservative" were "worn out" labels that didn't accurately describe Obama or his challenger Mitt Romney, respectively. Instead, Alter suggested that what truly distinguished the two candidates is that while Romney "came up" as a venture capitalist, Obama was a human capitalist (Alter, 2012).

³⁸ This is for productivity measured as output per labor hour. For productivity per person employed, the U.S. ranks either 8th or 9th over the last decade, trailing only the oil producing states of Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, plus Luxembourg, Norway, Ireland, and Singapore (see The Conference Board, 2015, 'LP-Person EKS' and 'LP-Hour GK' tabs).

³⁹ A 2016 report published by the Brookings Institute is exemplary of the stickiness of the notion that productivity and growth necessarily produce widely shared prosperity. The research conducted for the report, which examined the recovery from the Great Recession between 2009 and 2014 for 100 metropolitan areas, found that while 95 cities saw gains in metropolitan GDP, employment, and *aggregate* wages, and 63 metros saw gains in productivity and *average* wages, only eight saw increases in the *median* wage (a better indicator of how the average person is paid than aggregate or average wages). Nevertheless, in the report's summary its authors explain that "[s]uccessful economic development should put a metropolitan economy on a higher trajectory of long-run growth by improving the productivity of individuals and firms in order to raise local standards of living for all people" (Shearer et al, 2016).

⁴⁰ The U.S. Census tracks the percentage of the U.S. population living in poverty at different ratios of income to poverty. Between 1980 and 2015, the percentage of the U.S. population living at or below 50% of the official poverty increased from 4.4 to 6.1. The percentage living at or below 75% of the official poverty increased from 8.3 to 9.4. The percentage of the population living at or below 100% of the official poverty line over the same period went from 13.0 to 13.5 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

⁴¹ This is in terms of the number of new jobs the BLS expects to be created between 2014 and 2024. The BLS also projects job growth for each occupation as a percentage increase over the current (2014) employment in that field. Of the top 20 fastest growing jobs by percentage, 11 require a Bachelor's degree or higher.

⁴² The labor share of income (or 'wage share') measures the share of all national income created in a given time period that is paid to labor in the form of wages and benefits, rather than to capital.

⁴³ Being subject to a non-compete agreement obviously works against the neoclassical assumption that workers will be paid at the level of their productivity because it prevents firms from having to raise the wages of productive employees in competition with other firms.

⁴⁴ A salient contemporary example of this tendency is the movement of international manufacturers out of China – once a prime destinations for Western foreign direct investment – in response to growing wages and labor activism there (see Cave, 2014; Crabtree, 2015; Morris, 2015; Rapoza, 2012; Roberts, 2010).

⁴⁵ According to a dataset recently published online by the Brookings Institute, many of the U.S.'s cities with the highest concentrations of human capital and 'creative' workers rank among the most unequal in the country (see Holmes and Berube, 2016, 'City Appendix').

⁴⁶ While it could be argued that public education, as a tax funded institution, is in fact redistributive, I would argue that it is not given the fact that children from wealthy families almost invariably attend better schools than children from low-income families – a situation that likely mirrors what would happen in the absence of tax funded school systems.

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APPENDIX C

The Apologetic Geographies of Contemporary U.S. Education Reform

To be submitted to *ACME*

By Jared Powell

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the perpetual discussion about how to ‘fix’ the U.S.’s educational system should be seen as an attempt by its powerfully positioned interlocutors to collapse popular discontent with a variety of persistent social injustices into a focused dissatisfaction with the U.S.’s public schools. After proposing a methodological framework through which reformist rhetoric can be critically interrogated, I show that the narrative with which the ‘education reform movement’ has sought to perform this reduction reifies the national economy and nation-state as aggrieved entities, weakened and threatened by the U.S.’s alleged educational inadequacies. I conclude that, reformer claims to the contrary, directing reformist energies to shoring up these imaginary entities is incompatible with the pursuit of social justice.

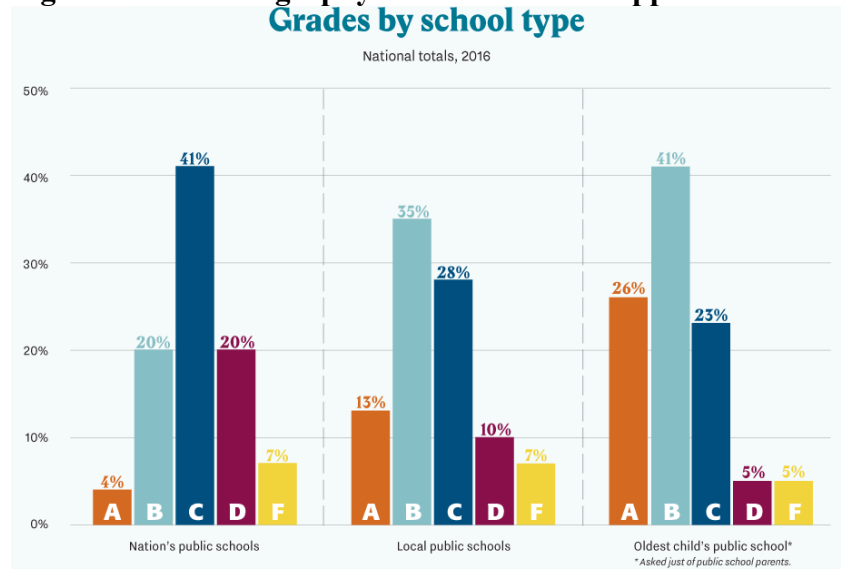
Introduction

Throughout the history of publicly funded and government administered schooling in the U.S., the business community and political elite¹ have used their unique access to state power to push for curricular, administrative, and procedural reforms capable of preserving established social arrangements in the face of political, economic, cultural, and technological change (Au, 2009; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Foster, 2011; Katz, 1976; 1995). Over the last three decades, the assemblage demanding education reform has expanded to include a plethora of non-profit advocacy organizations², for-profit educational service providers³, philanthropic foundations⁴, civil rights groups⁵, lobbying organizations⁶, university-based research centers⁷, journalists⁸, filmmakers⁹, and celebrities¹⁰. This otherwise diverse coalition is given coherence as a social movement by its shared contention that flaws internal to the public education system are largely responsible for growing inequality in the domestic economy and the alleged erosion of the U.S.’s

influence internationally. In speeches, lectures, interviews, books, status reports, press releases, editorials, social media posts, documentary films, and major motion pictures, affiliates of the education reform movement warn that without substantial improvement in the quality of schooling U.S. students receive – as would be indicated by improved scores on domestically and internationally administered standardized exams¹¹ – incomes for large portions of the American population will remain stagnant or decline (e.g. Aber et al, 2015; Brock et al, 1990; The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 2007), and the U.S. will lose the competitive edge that has secured its global sway for most of the last century (e.g. Klein, Rice & Levy, 2012; National Research Council, 2007; The Editorial Board, 2015).

Mainstream media outlets have tended to treat the notion that U.S. public schools are failing as axiomatic (O’Neil, 2012), and polling data suggest that the reform movement’s effort to implant this view within public opinion has, for the most part, succeeded. Every year, PDK, a professional organization of educators collaborates with Gallup to survey the public about its views on the public education system in the U.S. For one question, parents of public school children are asked to grade the public school their oldest child attends; all respondents are asked to grade public schools in their “local” community, and “in the nation as a whole.” Although a solid majority of public school parents have consistently given the school their own children attend a grade of ‘A’ or ‘B’ each year since 1985, a majority of the public at large has just as consistently given public schools “in the nation as a whole” a grade of ‘C,’ ‘D,’ or ‘F’ over the same period (see Figure 1). In other words, the positive views of individual public schools generally held by the parents of children that actually attend them seem to be outweighed by the negative views of the system “as a whole” adopted by individuals whose opinions were likely shaped by something other than contemporaneous engagement with any particular school.

Figure 6 – The Geography of Public School Approval in the U.S.



(Source: Richardson, 2016, p. 9)

This paper contends that the divergence between what public school parents believe about the schools their own children attend and what the public at large believes about the quality of the public schools in the U.S. as a whole is evidence of a concerted effort by individuals and groups affiliated with the education reform movement to convince the public that the country's educational system is failing to accomplish its institutional objectives. Analyzing the rhetoric deployed by the movement to that end is used to open its narrative up to scrutiny from several angles. First, the analysis that follows intends to make explicit the reform movement's implicit determination of what the objectives of the public education system are (and ought to be), and thus what constitutes 'failure' on the part of the public schools. Put differently, this paper seeks to make plain the fact that the institutional objectives of the public education system assumed in the reform movement's appeals to the public have been selected by the elite (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Katz, 2001) rather than arrived at through a democratic form of decision-making. The second aim of the analysis that follows is to shed light on what the narrative crafted by the education reform movement suggests about why its critique has been

directed at the level of performance (i.e. the failure of the system to accomplish objectives) rather than at the level of purpose (i.e. the inappropriateness of the objectives themselves).

I begin by merging Gramsci's conception of reform as a strategic concession made by the hegemon to the subaltern (1971) with Marcuse's observation that reformism serves as a method of pacification by making all social ills appear as targetable anomalies against a constructed backdrop of wellbeing and equality (1991) into a framework for deconstructing reformist rhetoric. The purpose of this framework is to reveal the political utility reformism provides hegemonic groups beyond the immediate material consequences of any particular piece of legislation or policy change. I then situate the goals to which the contemporary reform movement most often addresses its efforts – macroeconomic growth and national security – within the broader set of governmental imperatives common to capitalist states. Drawing on various strands of critical human geography, I show that by casting material wellbeing and security as ideals that should be pursued at the level of a reified nation-state rather than the individual, the education reform movement helps to legitimize the very norms and practices responsible for the material deprivation and everyday insecurity faced by exploited and oppressed groups.

Deconstructing Reform

The maintenance of a particular hegemony is, by definition, incompatible with radical social change. It is therefore incumbent on hegemonic groups to preempt forms of discontent that have the potential to spur the subaltern into transformative action. According to Gramsci, this requires those in power to make periodic class-based concessions to their subordinates:

“The fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium

should be formed – in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind.” (1971, p. 161). Hegemonic governance, in this excerpt, is differentiated from simple dominance and/or sovereign rule by its reliance on occasional “sacrifices” from the leading class to secure the consent of the governed. But, as Gramsci goes on to explain, these concessions must ultimately be somewhat superficial, as deep/structural political-economic change would erode the very foundations of the hegemon’s power. Class compromise is meant to forestall class struggle, and specific economic concessions are used as a substitute for generalized economic democracy: “...there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity.” (ibid)

The framework that structures the remainder of this paper is based on the contention that the reform movements called for and initiated by the political and economic elite are used to legitimize the institutional buttresses of existing social relations. More specifically, the argument that follows begins with the contention that ‘reform’ names a tactic through which the socially powerful seek to limit the concessional costs of maintaining their power by prompting the public to view the nature of, causes of, and range of possible solutions to, persistent social injustices through a narrowly constructed frame.

My focus on the use of reform by elites is not meant to deny the long history of progressive efforts to improve public institutions and industries, nor the significant social changes that have taken place as a result of grassroots reformism. It also goes without saying that not all reform efforts initiated by the powerful are intended to serve progressive ends. But I concern myself in this paper with an elite-led, yet nominally progressive reform movement

because of what I believe such movements reveal about how unjust norms, institutions, and practices are shielded from radical change. I contend that the call for reform is strategically conciliatory, in that it seeks to manage the tensions between hegemony and democracy by acknowledging, but simultaneously placing a inertial discursive frame around, persistent and recurring forms of social injustice that are necessary byproducts of the exercise of disproportionate power. I further submit that this frame is strategically narrowed by the call for reform's constituent rhetorical elements: the apology and the promise.

With the 'apologetic' component of reform, I refer to the tendency for politicians and bureaucrats to profess an empathetic connection to the public by acknowledging the undesirability of extant circumstances. *We, like you, are troubled by x*. But as Waterstone and de Leeuw (2010) have pointed out, state-issued apologies also have the effect of implying that acts *not* being apologized for are, by default, legitimate. That is, by specifying what the apologizer *is* sorry for, the act of apologizing implies that the apologizer is *not*, and need not be, sorry for anything else. In this way, the reformist apology attempts to draw a rhetorical line between what is an appropriate target of critique, and what is not.

Capitalizing on a widespread lack of awareness about current events and social issues among the public (Duffy & Stannard, 2014), the call for reform thereby facilitates efforts to engineer consent for the preservation of an existing hegemony by dictating to the public the source and nature of its own grievances, and thereby paving the way for powerful state actors to promise pre-packaged 'solutions' that pose no threat to the socio-structural conditions that brought these grievances about (Slater, 2014; cf. Bernays, 1928; 1947). In other words, the apology offered in the call for reform facilitates state efforts to temporarily diffuse potentially disruptive forms of popular disaffection by isolating, and drawing public anger to, artificially

discrete social problems that can be credibly addressed with legislative or other fixes that do not stretch or break the social-political-economic bounds of an existing hegemony.

The Call for Education Reform as Apology

Though the education reform movement tends to position itself as part of the long struggle for social justice, the two most consistent themes of the literature it has produced over the last half-century are the need for economic growth and national security. That is, calls for education reform have long tended to effect an apology to the public for failing to ensure that its educational system has produced the kind of labor force necessary to ensure a constantly expanding economy and secure national territory. This section documents the prevalence of these themes, and argues that neither actually speaks directly to social justice.

Macro-economic stagnation

Since at least the 1960s, a broad cross-section of public figures in the U.S. have promoted the idea that expanded access to education must be among the tools brought to bear on material deprivation and income inequality. Lyndon Johnson's 1964 State of the Union Address, for example, listed "better schools" alongside "better health, and better homes, and better training, and better job opportunities" as the government's "chief weapons" in a proposed "all-out" and "unconditional war on poverty" (Johnson, 1964). Though hardly "all out" or "unconditional," legislation passed shortly after Johnson's speech sought to address material deprivation and unequal access to upward mobility on multiple 'fronts' simultaneously through the creation of various redistributive mechanisms at the federal level of the U.S. government. One such mechanism was spelled out in Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965), which established, among other things, a federal role in bringing balance to the educational opportunities afforded white/non-poor students and non-white/poor students by

channeling federal grant monies to schools with high numbers of students from low-income families.

Among the goals of the model of domestic economic governance from which Title I was spawned (“Keynesianism” or “Fordism”) was to generate economic growth by increasing the share of the population capable of engaging in mass consumption. This was to be accomplished by boosting effective demand among low- and middle-income households through various forms of government spending (e.g. direct job creation, infrastructural development, subsidized home loans, and a variety of ‘safety net’ programs). But while the Title I funding stream survives mostly intact¹², economic governance in the U.S. over the last three-plus decades increasingly reflects a move away from efforts to put a floor under *demand*, to a belief that the only way to ensure widely shared prosperity is to prop up the *supply* of goods and services sent to the market by the private sector.

Though demonstrably unjust and wasteful forms of corporate subsidization, deregulation, and privatization have been regular components of the so-called ‘supply-side’ approach to economic governance (Harvey, 2007), its adherents within the government, media-think tank complex, and academia tend to present their agenda as being fundamentally about the comparatively benign goal of removing impediments to the expansion of commerce (Peck & Tickell, 2002). Among the more common impediments cited by members of this group is a nationwide shortage of adequately skilled labor (e.g. Bloomberg News, 2007; Brock et al, 1990; Business Roundtable, 2005; Carnevale & Rose, 2011; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Cooper et al, 2012; Dimon & Seltzer, 2014; Elkind, 2016; Gates, 2015; Holdren & Lander, 2012; Symonds, Schwartz & Ferguson, 2011). Because of the political influence of the individuals and groups holding this view, educational discourse in the U.S. has come to be centered on the goal

of raising the productivity of the workforce by improving the skills and innovative capacity of public school graduates (e.g. Delong, Goldin & Katz, 2003; Lynch, 2015; Obama, 2013; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2012).

In the neoclassical economic theory that prevails among the class from which the education reform movement's leadership comes, workers' wages necessarily rise with their productivity (see Kraushaar, 2014; Lacker, 2015; Mankiw, 2006; Rothwell, 2015; Sheffield, 2014; Yellen, 2015). It is also commonly assumed within these circles that laborers necessarily benefit from aggregate economic growth. Exemplary of the consensus that has been built around this idea within the ideological confines that constitute the gap between liberal and conservative economic thought in the contemporary U.S., a recent report on "Restoring the American Dream" co-published by the Brookings Institution and the American Enterprise Institute includes the following statement from its authors:

We strongly and unanimously agree [that] stronger economic growth would contribute greatly to our goals of reducing poverty and improving mobility. Indeed, the strong economic growth [the U.S.] enjoyed in the roughly 25 years after World War II and more briefly in the middle to late 1990s helped generate the large poverty reductions and income growth that we experienced in those periods. Greater productivity growth in the U.S., which has lagged in the past decade (as it did in the 1970s and 1980s), would help raise real wages, while robust employment growth for the economy overall would certainly improve employment and earnings for lower-income groups. (Aber et al, 2015, p. 13)

From this position, it follows that the (alleged) failure of the U.S. public education system to graduate adequately productive workers is responsible for lackluster economic growth,

which bears, in turn, a large share of the responsibility for the U.S.'s growing poverty rates and income inequality. For those subscribing to this narrative chain, 'underperforming' teachers and the institutions that negotiate on their behalf and represent their interests in labor disputes, are among the country's primary impediments to social justice. During the Chicago Teachers Union's (CTU) 2012 strike, for example, *New York Times* op-ed columnist Nicholas Kristof argued that the education reforms that would otherwise offer disadvantaged students a "ladder of opportunity" were being blocked by the CTU in the interest of protecting its weakest performers from accountability (Kristof, 2012). Like Davis Guggenheim's highly publicized documentary *Waiting for Superman* (2011) that appeared a year earlier, Kristof's piece pits the interests of low-income, black, and Hispanic children (a legitimately sympathetic grouping) against those of teachers unions (portrayed as narrowly self-interested and indifferent to the suffering of the U.S.'s underserved children), while implicitly absolving broader social, political, and economic phenomena of their roles in producing the educational segregation he rightly decries.

Echoing the sentiment implied in Kristof's essay, Richard Whitmire of *USA Today* has stated that the choice for "traditional liberals" and "progressives" is simple: "[s]upport teachers' unions or fight for low-income, minority children" (Whitmire, 2015). Dmitri Melhorn, co-founder of the education reform group Students First, went further, suggesting that "[u]nions are structurally biased against student interests" (Melhorn, 2014). Unsurprisingly, liberal journalists and think-tankers are not alone in their efforts to paint the U.S.'s teachers' unions as an obstacle to social justice. Terry Moe, a political scientist at Stanford University's conservative Hoover Institute stated in an op-ed that collectively bargained-for contracts between teachers unions and school systems "guarantee that the schools will be organized in perverse ways that no one in their right mind would favor if they just cared about what is best for kids" (Moe, 2012). As a

result, says Moe, reading from the education reform script, “[o]ur children are being denied a quality education, fulfilling careers and productive lives. The nation is losing precious human capital, its long-term economic growth is taking a direct and destructive hit and its position of leadership in the world is seriously threatened.” (ibid)

In a more recent essay Kristof (2015a) has suggested that because teacher and teachers union resistance to the education reform movement’s policy agenda has left K-12 education “an exhausted, bloodsoaked battlefield,” the best thing for the reform movement to do would be to focus on early childhood educational interventions, as these would likely be more “cost effective” and less controversial than those made at later ages. As is typical of self-styled voices of reason writing in support of education reform, Kristof acknowledges in this piece the role that poverty plays in disrupting the neurological development (*see* Shonkoff et al, 2011) and subsequent educational achievement of young children (*see* Berliner, 2013; Morsy & Rothstein, 2015; Reardon, 2011), but nevertheless describes educational inequality – rather than the ongoing reproduction of poverty itself¹³ – as “America’s original sin” (Kristof, 2015a). In so doing, Kristof elevates the contingency-laden route to socio-economic equity through broad-based skill upgrades, above the more direct route to equity via redistribution.¹⁴

Yet while the idea that ‘a rising tide raises all boats’ has long been an article of faith among those at the commanding heights of the U.S. and global economies (Philipsen, 2015; Woodward, 2015), its abstraction from political reality prevents it from adequately accounting for intervening factors, including, most significantly, the conflicting interests of labor and capital. For the individual firms that animate the capitalist economy the primary goal is not merely to grow, but to increase the difference between what is received from the sale of the goods and/or services offered and what is spent on the means through which these goods and/or

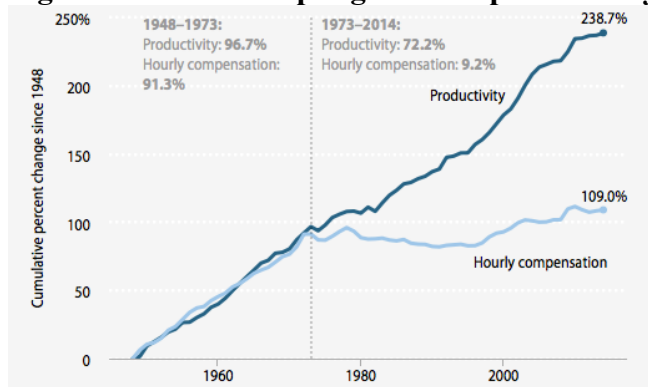
services are brought into existence – that is, to maximize profit. One of capital’s oldest methods of increasing the gap between what it invests in production and what it realizes in return has been to drive down the price of labor, either by shifting to more capital intensive operations (Braverman, 1998; Marx, 1990 [1867]), ‘stalking’ the globe in search of locations with ever-lower prevailing wages (Harvey, 2007; Smith, 2008), using its access to state power to pacify workers and/or weaken labor solidarity (Riley, 2012; Marcuse, 1991), and by ensuring that there are more job seekers than jobs available in key industries (Marx, 1990 [1867]; Salzman, Kuehn & Lowell, 2013). In short, capital seeks to capture the largest share possible of the value created by labor, and has used the technological, political, and martial power at its disposal to ensure that productivity increases *do not* in fact require compensatory wage increases.

The neoclassical claim that aggregated economic growth causes the *average* income to grow is nothing more than a mathematical truism that reveals nothing about how this income is actually distributed among its recipients (i.e. an increase in any numerator [e.g. GNI] without an equal increase in its denominator [population] necessarily produces an enlarged quotient [GNI per capita]). Median household income allows one to trace the general trend in incomes over time because it is not effected by extreme data points at either end of a distribution, but for this very reason it, too, is incapable of revealing anything significant about what aggregate economic growth does to incomes for individuals/households outside of the middle of the socioeconomic spectrum¹⁵. Simply put, statistical measures that use one number to represent a set of data obscure more than they reveal when the object of analysis is inequity along a spectrum.

Enter class analysis. Once the workforce is disaggregated, it is plain to see that, contrary to neoclassical theory, labor productivity and labor compensation for the average worker¹⁶

decoupled around three decades ago (see Graphic 1). Although the more or less continuous increase in the productivity of the U.S. workforce (depicted by the dark blue line on Graphic 1) allowed GDP per capita to grow by roughly 68% between 1970 and 2013, this growth was not

Figure 7 – The decoupling of labor productivity and labor compensation, 1948-2014



(Source: Bivens & Mishel, 2015)

realized equally across all earners. While households at the 95th percentile saw their income increase by 58% during this period, those at the 20th percentile grew by only 5.8%¹⁷. The commonplace contention expressed by Aber et al (2015) above that economic growth in the 1940s-1960s *caused* (rather than *coincided with*) reductions in poverty and wage growth during that era ignores the role that relatively high union density, a comparatively strong social safety net, the influence of Keynesian thought on policymaking, and the relatively circumscribed power of corporate shareholders¹⁸ played in strengthening labor’s bargaining position, and protecting its share of national income generated during that era. Furthermore, the notion that the average worker significantly benefitted from strong macroeconomic growth in the 1990s is weakened somewhat by none other than Alan Greenspan’s triumphant testimony before Congress in 1997 that, contrary to expectations, the “exceptional” economic expansion taking place during that decade was not putting significant upward pressure on wages. This “[a]typical restraint on compensation increases,” appeared, to Greenspan, “to be mainly the consequence of greater worker insecurity,” and an “increased willingness of workers to trade off smaller increases in

wages for greater job security” (Greenspan, 1997). In short, the aggregate economic growth of the 1990s touted by Aber et al and many others was real and substantial, but occurred well after the era in which such growth could be expected to ensure wage growth and job security for medium- and low-income workers.

The point I’m trying to make here is not a novel one. As long as profit-motivated firms mediate the transfer of value from the laboring process to the laborer, neither productivity growth nor macro-economic growth can guarantee reductions in poverty or income inequality (Harvey, 2007; Marx, 1990; Smith, 2008). By reifying the nation-state as the geographical scale at which economic growth ought to be pursued, the rhetoric of the education reform movement ignores evidence that increases in labor productivity and aggregate economic output have, in fact, coincided with a *widening* of income inequality over the last three decades.¹⁹ Framing present levels of inequity as a product of aggregated macro-economic stagnation rather than class-specific *wage* stagnation is therefore not only empirically erroneous, it also obscures the role that political-economic power plays in determining how the social product is distributed. Given the heavy influence that some of the U.S.’s wealthiest families have over the education reform movement, it is difficult to avoid suspicion that efforts to position productivity and economic growth as primary goals of public education, while blaming one of the U.S.’s most unionized occupations for insufficient progress in these areas is, contrary to the reform movement’s self-presentation, ultimately class-interested. The following paragraphs suggest that similar biases are at work in the reform movement’s appeals to ‘national security.’

National insecurity

According to Cowen and Smith (2009), the logic guiding the state’s pursuit of ‘security’ has shifted over the last few decades from a dual focus on expanding the territory under its

control and building a nation within that territory, to a focus on entrenching its control over the key markets and institutional levers of the global economy²⁰. Economic power and influence, once the fruits that accrued to states possessing geopolitical power, are now the means by which states seek to attain and/or maintain geopolitical power. The trajectory of elite-sponsored education reforms has mirrored this shift. Until roughly the 1980s, education reforms typically centered on the need for schooling to contribute to the U.S.'s preparedness for conventional, militarized forms of conflict with other nation-states (Terzian, 2008)²¹, and various forms of assimilation into, or the development of an affinity for, the American nation (Spring, 2007; Hartman, 2008).

Over the last three decades, the rhetoric of the education reform movement has come to reflect a changed understanding of how public schooling ought to contribute to the pursuit of 'national security.' Educational improvement is not only needed to ensure that the U.S. is prepared to compete militarily with other nation-states, it now must also prepare American youth to populate the key industries, research clusters, and power centers of the global economy (Means, 2011; Pierce, 2013). For example, as the Cold War approached its twilight, the Reagan Administration released what is perhaps still the most well-known appeal for education reform in U.S. history, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), which urged policymakers and citizens alike to demand higher educational standards lest the U.S. should cede global economic preeminence to its emerging industrial (and no longer military) rivals: Japan, South Korea, and West Germany.

In what amounts to a reiteration of the warnings issued in *A Nation at Risk*, former chancellor of the New York City Department of Education Joel Klein and former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice co-authored a report in 2012 titled *U.S. Education Reform and National*

Security, published by the Council on Foreign Relations, a highly influential, ‘nonpartisan’ think tank. In the report, Klein and Rice argued that “sclerotic bureaucracy, a lack of incentive for innovation, and few rewards for excellent teacher performance” (p. x) have prevented the U.S.’s public education system from creating the “human capital” on which “national security” now depends (Klein & Rice, 2012). Though passing reference is made to the role education should play in the creation of an informed and civic-minded electorate, the problem foregrounded and continually returned to in the essay is the U.S.’s potential loss of international dominance at the hands of better-educated rival states should the U.S. fail to enact the reforms necessary to produce a sufficient quantity of ‘knowledge workers.’ Striking a similar tone, the Obama Administration’s 2010 National Security Strategy identifies a “fundamental connection between our national security” and “our national [economic] competitiveness” (p. 1). The latter, which has supposedly “been set back in recent years” (p. 9), must be restored, according to the document, by “supporting high standards for early learning, reforming public schools, increasing access to higher education and job training, and promoting high-demand skills and education” (p. 29). Signaling that the geoeconomic stakes are now as high as the geopolitical stakes once were, Obama’s 2011 State of the Union Address described the present context of education reform as “our generation’s *Sputnik* moment” (Obama, 2011)²².

Major media outlets play a vital role in putting such ideas about the connection between the fight for control of the global economy and national security – and the centrality of education reform to this struggle – into circulation among policymakers and the general public. Thomas Friedman, for example, regularly uses his highly visible and politically influential *New York Times* column (Domosh, 2010; Fernandez, 2011) to argue that if the U.S. is to maintain its lead (i.e. power) over the developing world, its aspiring labor market entrants must acquire the

competencies, sensibilities, and innovative capacities necessary to dominate the thoroughly globalized high-tech/high-skill industries (e.g. Friedman, 2012a; 2013). Seeking to give weight to such claims, Friedman occasionally cites excerpts from his personal conversations with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan on education's role in preserving the U.S.'s position within the global hierarchy of states (e.g. Friedman, 2014; 2015)²³. In a 2012 piece, for example, Friedman suggested that Barack Obama (then recently re-elected as president) ought to nominate Duncan for the position of Secretary of State, given his experience negotiating with local and national teachers unions (likened in the essay to "the Russians and Chinese"), and presumed capacity to explain to "the Middle East" that while "Islam is one of the world's great monotheistic faiths...it is not the answer to Arab development" (Friedman, 2012b). Duncan, in other words, would be just the person to convince Muslims that unlike Islam, "Math is the answer. Education is the answer" (ibid). For Friedman, the compatibility between educational governance and the crafting of foreign policy are ultimately two sides of the same coin. In a book published a year earlier, Friedman and political scientist Michael Mandelbaum suggested that if Hillary Clinton – then actually serving as Secretary of State – *really* cared about the national security of the U.S. she would ask to be relieved of her duties at the State Department and nominated to be Secretary of Education instead (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011).

In these and other texts carrying the reform movement's narrative, the idea that the government's pursuit of 'national security' is obviously and necessarily in the best interest of all individuals able to claim U.S. citizenship is treated as an obvious truth. But as is the case with labor productivity and economic growth, the popular presentation of national security as a universal good is undercut by the problems generated as a result of the actions taken and sanctioned by the state in pursuit of its realization. Many of these problems stem from the

tendency for state actors and influential non-state actors to treat the security of ‘the nation’ as a surrogate for the everyday security of the individual subjects that ostensibly constitute it, and to prioritize the former at the expense of the latter. The translation of this ontology of ‘security’ into practice is problematic for at least two reasons.

First, the tendency to focus attention and resources on perceived threats to the ‘nation’ as though it were a thing-in-itself transcending its human constituents has meant that institutions tasked with addressing threats posed by foreign belligerents have been given priority access to state resources over those addressing far more common sources of everyday insecurity. Though there were nearly 12 times as many deaths in the U.S. from furniture tip-overs as there were from acts fitting the State Department’s definition of ‘terrorism’ between 2001 and 2013, and lightning strikes have caused, on average, more deaths in the U.S. *each year* than agents acting on behalf of a foreign entity over the same period²⁴, there is a bipartisan consensus that ‘defense’ budgets must be maintained (Jaffe, 2015) at levels that regularly exceed the next 10 highest spending countries in the rest of the world combined (Koba, 2014). Noting the stark contrast between the mass media’s extensive and breathless coverage of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing and the relatively paltry coverage of the equally violent (and in fact more deadly) explosion at an under-regulated Texas fertilizer plant four days later, Bigger has suggested that when it comes to national security discourse in the U.S. “it’s as though problems that cannot be solved with a Northrup-Grumman product are not legible as problems at all” (2013, p.4). With similar dismay, Coleman (2009) argues that the convention of treating ‘security’ as a macro-political, ‘foreign policy’ issue allows the diffuse and more frequently occurring instances of violence and insecurity experienced by subaltern groups to often go unaddressed, or even acknowledged as such (*see also* Hyndman, 2001; Pain, 2014; Tyner & Inwood, 2014).

Indeed, governmental funding for programs that deal with everyday threats to the wellbeing of those living in the U.S. seem to exist in a state of constant peril. For example, though domestic violence accounts for roughly 20% of all violent crime in the U.S. and at least 300,000 individuals are sexually assaulted each year (Truman & Langton, 2014), government programs that address and help victims cope with domestic violence and sexual assault have experienced dramatic budget cuts as a result of the bipartisan commitment to fiscal austerity in the wake of the 2008-11 recession (Murphy, 2013). Similarly, although market poverty rates have increased markedly over the last two decades, the inflation-adjusted value of the federal cash assistance made available to poor families has been reduced by more than 20% in most states (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2015), and the number of families served by these programs has been reduced by more than half since welfare was “reformed” in 1996 (Shaefer & Edin, 2013).

Further, though violent attacks by radical right-wing individuals and groups operating within the U.S. are occurring with increasing frequency, and are far more common than those committed by foreigners (Cassidy, 2015; Shane, 2015), resources are disproportionately concentrated in activities meant to address the latter, and, in some cases, have been stripped entirely from institutions meant to address the former (Johnson, 2012)²⁵. To take one last example, recent medical research has shown that the bodily absorption of toxic chemicals from food and other mass produced goods (and even, in fact, from normal respiration), is highly common among those living in the U.S., and is closely linked to a variety of health problems, including cancer, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, and various neurological disorders. More distressingly, the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics notes that “virtually every pregnant woman in the USA has at least 43 different [inorganic] chemicals in

her body” at any given time (Di Renzo et al, 2015, p. 2). Because many of these chemicals can be passed from a mother to her unborn child, most infants are born, according to the National Cancer Institute, “pre-polluted” with disease causing chemicals (Lefall & Kripke, 2010, p. vii). Yet the incorporation of many of these chemicals into consumer goods remains largely unregulated by virtue of: (a) the heavy lobbying of government officials by the business community, (b) a resulting tendency for these officials to govern the usage of chemicals based on whether or not they have been *definitively* proven to have *directly* caused significant harm, and (c) insufficient governmental funding for the kind of research that could potentially generate this proof (ibid).

The second problem with the tendency for ‘security’ to be sought at the level of ‘the nation’ is that despite the state’s best efforts to present its pursuit of ‘national security’ as an apolitical response to exogenous circumstances (Amoore, 2004; 2009; Beck, 2008), actions taken to that end betray a rather specific, ideologically driven notion of who and/or what constitutes the ‘nation’ and is thereby entitled to the state’s provision of ‘security.’ As suggested in the preceding paragraph, the state seems to be losing interest in ‘securing’ the day-to-day wellbeing of the national citizenry (i.e. the ‘imagined community’ of humans that serve as referents for the concept of ‘nation’ [Anderson, 2006]). Left intact, however, is the state’s role in ‘securing’ the political and economic systems that preserve the power enjoyed by its leading class (Althusser, 1971; Engels, 2000 [1884]; Mandel, 1969; Miliband, 1969; Neocleous, 2006). To resolve the conflicts that arise along the axes of class, race, gender, for instance, in favor of those at their dominant poles, the state has shown a willingness to proactively repress those from the ranks of the subaltern perceived to be a threat to those systems.

In 2001, legal scholar Paul Robinson argued that the accretion of ‘tough on crime’ legislation in the 1980s and 1990s – including “three strikes” laws, mandatory-minimum sentencing laws, the lowering of the age at which an individual can be tried as an adult, punishment for association with certain groups independent of an individual’s actual conduct, and sex offender registries – had transformed the prevailing approach to criminal justice in the U.S. from one based primarily on desert for past offenses to one based on the incapacitation of those thought likely to re/commit one (Robinson, 2001). Dangerousness, to use Robinson’s word, had effectively become a punishable offense in itself.

This juridical shift has paralleled changes to the logic guiding the state’s pursuit of security more generally. According to Katharyne Mitchell (2010), the turn to “broken windows” policing in a number of large metropolitan areas during and since the 1990s – i.e. the aggressive pursuit and punishment of those guilty of what would otherwise be considered minor crimes or merely nuisances (vandalism, panhandling, loitering, trespassing) so as to advertise the government’s commitment to ‘law and order’ – exemplifies the state’s turn to the proactive administration of the everyday spaces of social life as a supplement to the conventional macro-scale, militarized attempts at geospatial containment characteristic of the Cold War era. A key element of Mitchell’s argument is that such security discourses not only engender problematic and abusive policy agendas, but also construct a hierarchy of subject positions with respect to ‘security’ itself. While certain groups are cast as potential victims (tourists, investors, gentrifiers) and are thereby called upon to serve as a rationale for the state’s quasi-authoritarian imposition of ‘order’ on urban space, others are interpellated as threats (the poor, the homeless, non-whites) and subjected to the harshly punitive measures that ‘broken windows’ policing entails (*see also* Mitchell, 2009).

Focusing on ways the state's pursuit of security articulates with young people in particular, Cindi Katz has theorized that those in power have been seeking to reconfigure childhood itself as a means of addressing the political-economic, geopolitical, and ecological insecurities produced by capitalism, as an alternative to confronting the latter's many contradictions (2008). Katz points to contemporary trends in public schooling as part of a broader strategy through which the elite have sought to avoid dealing with the social crises generated by neoliberalism by proactively ensuring that today's children grow into manageable, entrepreneurial, resilient, and exploitable adults (ibid). More recently, Katz has argued that poor youth of color are effectively treated by the state as 'waste' – that is, as the unwanted excess of a profligate and generally uncaring society that must somehow be contained and managed so as to preserve the political utility provided to the social elite by a comfortingly meritocratic aesthetic of social reproduction (Katz, 2011). Katz notes that in public schools, the treatment of young people of color as 'waste' has manifested itself over the last few decades in the shifting of monies from things like enriched instruction, well trained educators, and extracurricular activities, to metal detectors, closed-circuit camera systems, a police presence on campus (i.e. 'school resource officers') and, at the level of the state, an expansion of the prison system. The ubiquity of surveillance, discipline, and law enforcement functionaries at schools serving poor youth of color (see Nguyen, 2014; 2015) has led to what Michelle Fine and Jessica Ruglis have called the "soft coercive migration" of these youth away from sites of education and empowerment, to the state's ever-expanding military and carceral systems (2009, p. 20, *see also* Cowen & Siciliano, 2011).

Following the above authors, it appears that 'national security,' in practice, inverts the relationship between the subject, security, and society that one is meant to take away from the

state's 'national security' rhetoric. That is, rather than mitigating the variety of threats posed *by* the existing social order to the safety/wellbeing of individual subjects, national security practices seem instead to implicitly justify the repression of individual subjects that can be construed as posing a threat *to* the existing social order (Amoore, 2009; Beck, 2008; Martin, 2007; Tyner, 2013). Though the thoroughly fluid and contingent nature of social life renders preparedness ephemeral, and 'national security,' therefore, an ever-elusive goal (Anderson, 2010), it is the very impossibility of steady-state 'security' that provides state actors with indefinite license to engage in the repressive practices that contribute to the preservation of existing distributions of wellbeing and architectures of power. Put differently, casting resistance to extant social arrangements as threats to 'national security' lends legitimacy to the state's ongoing, often violent efforts to harden and police racialized, classed, and gendered hierarchies, in spite of the everyday insecurities created by these hierarchies for those occupying their lower levels. As a result, the promise of 'national security' is rendered illusory for subjects who diverge from what powerful state actors consider acceptable forms of subjectivity, and merely coincidental for those who choose to conform. Given the rather narrow conception of what constitutes a threat warranting a response employing government resources, and the gendered, raced, and classed limits placed on access to the class of individuals deemed worthy of protection from these threats, one might say that the so-called 'security state' is more notional than national.

Drowning in the rising tide, anchored by the notional security state

The education reform movement has spent the last few decades apologizing for the role that supposedly ineffective public schools have played in bringing about 'national' economic stagnation and 'national' insecurity. Implicit in this apology, of course, is the idea that macroeconomic expansion and the preservation of existing social relations are in the best interest

of all. However, closer scrutiny suggests that the state-led pursuit of these goals is more likely to enrich the already wealthy and entrench uneven distributions of power and security.

By reifying the nation-state as the geographical scale at which economic growth ought to be pursued, the rhetoric of the education reform movement ignores abundant evidence that structural forces channel this growth away from those who produce it and those who most need it. By reifying the nation-state as a cohesive social entity needing to be ‘secured,’ the rhetoric of the reform movement legitimizes the state’s prioritization of the international and domestic threats to the interests of the country’s capital holders over those facing the most vulnerable members of the ‘national’ community (Graham, 2011), and provides cover for state practices that actually increase the violence inflicted on these groups. In short, by positioning the nation-state as an aggrieved party to which its rhetorical apologies are addressed, the education reform movement narrows the discursive window through which its promises to deal with social inequity and insecurity can be registered to promises that leave existing social arrangements – however unjust – in place.

Conclusion

According to Forgacs, Gramsci thought of reformism as a means of addressing political crisis that manifests as “a dialectic of conservation and innovation” (2000, p. 428). Reformism, in other words, is a tactic through which the state adapts to changing circumstances by strategically altering selected appendages of existing social arrangements so as to appear sensitive to the plight of the subaltern while still maintaining the hegemony of its leading class faction. In this reading, the call for reform provides elites with a platform from which to enact a strategically partial accommodation of demands made by those at the lower rungs of a societal hierarchy, while shielding from view the culpability of the institutional and intellectual

foundations of that hierarchy (Sassoon, 1982). Building on this theorization, I have proposed that the call for reform can be analyzed as an apology that seeks to shape the public's understanding of the nature of its own dissatisfaction, the goal being to construct artificially narrow bounds around the public's perception of what caused this dissatisfaction and what might be done to address its causes.

Applying this framework to the contemporary education reform movement in the U.S., I have argued that the elites at the head of this movement have deployed an apology that obscures the nature and causes of the everyday difficulties facing low-income and minority populations by rhetorically annexing their wellbeing to that of a reified macro-economy and nation-state. More specifically, I have attempted to show that the apologetic component of the education reform movement's discursive tactics has been centered on the claim that, by failing to ensure sustained national macro-economic growth and 'national' security, the public school system bears responsibility for the economic and corporeal vulnerabilities experienced by a large and growing share of the U.S. population. I then sought to demonstrate that this apology relies on a pair of plainly false assumptions, namely, that aggregated economic growth necessarily leads to broadly shared income increases, and that the state's pursuit of national security ensures protection from harm for those marginalized and/or oppressed under the prevailing set of social arrangements. In short, I have argued that by directing its apologies to the 'national' economy and 'national' geopolitical entity, the reform movement has lent legitimacy to forms of state governance that enrich the already wealthy and entrench uneven distributions of power and security, while strategically sidestepping recognition of the many inequities and injustices that a finer-grained examination of social life would reveal.

There is, of course, an element of truth at the heart of the reform movement's narrative. The educational experiences the U.S. offers low-income, black, and Hispanic students are, and have long been, unequal to those offered to relatively affluent and white students (Katz, 2001; Kozol, 2005; Spring, 1989; 2007). But by promoting the idea that widespread precarity and vulnerability can be attributed to the alleged failure of the public educational system, the education reform movement distracts public attention from the need for improvement beyond school walls; improvements that, it should be noted, would require much greater sacrifices by the powerful individuals and groups in charge of the education reform movement. The education reform movement is not merely a poorly executed attempt at social justice, nor is it simply a group of people doing the wrong things but for the right reasons. The education reform movement is the elite's preferred alternative to radical redistribution of power, and is therefore an obstacle to social justice in itself.

¹ I use the term "elite" throughout the paper to refer to what C. Wright Mills labeled "the power elite": those who occupy dominant positions within, or exert significant influence with regard to the activities of, the U.S.'s major corporate, military, and political institutions (Mills, 2000 [1956]).

² The names that nationally operative, not-for-profit education reform groups have given themselves tend to fall into a handful of categories. Taken together, these names form a simulacrum of the reform movement's narrative. One formulation of the reform movement's narrative would be that the U.S. needs a group of leaders (Academy for Urban School Leadership, Leadership for Educational Equity, New Leaders for New Schools) to recognize the urgency (50 State Campaign for Achievement Now, Education Reform Now) of the problem of school failure, who will settle for nothing less than excellence (Foundation for Educational Excellence, Foundation for Excellence in Education, Families for Excellent Schools) while more thoroughly integrating public education with the private sector (Education Sector, the National Center on Education and the Economy, the New Schools Venture Fund), on behalf of the country's children (All Children Matter, American Federation for Children, Stand for Children, Students First), and especially those from marginalized demographics (Black Alliance for Educational Options, the Equality Project, Partnership for Educational Justice). A much larger list could be made of similarly oriented and funded groups at the state and local levels. The advocacy work of these groups is assisted and coordinated by organizations like the Policy Innovators in Education Network (PIE Network) (www.pie-network.org/who/network-members), which provide member organizations with "research critical to enacting proven reforms" and "strategic advice and assistance" to reformers petitioning state governments. Among the "policy commitments" shared by PIE network are raising academic standards, pushing for the transfer of control over schools with persistently poor performance to outside management agencies, creating "powerful" accountability systems for teachers, principals and university education departments, and expanding the availability of charter schools and virtual [online] schools.

³ Examples include the online charter school company K-12 Inc., and the British publishing giant Pearson.

⁴ In total, philanthropic organizations spend around \$4 billion each year on educational initiatives. The most influential of these are the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The Walton Family Foundation, and The Eli and Judith Broad Foundation (see Barkan, 2011; Ravitch, 2013). Charter schools, the Teach for America program, education reform-oriented think tanks, and reform-friendly colleges of education are the primary beneficiaries of the ‘investments’ these foundations have made in ‘public’ education. (see: <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/Quick-Links/Program-Related-Investments>; <http://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/our-impact/k12-education/k12-education-grants-by-location>; http://www.broadeeducation.org/investments/current_investments/investments_all.html)

⁵ On January 11, 2015, groups including the American Association of University Women (AAUW), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), and the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) issued a joint statement declaring their support for standardized testing as a means of identifying inequities in the U.S. public education system. Operating under the widespread (and actively promulgated) assumption that these inequities are the product of watered-down curriculum and low quality instruction, the signatories of this statement demanded that the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) include a requirement that “each state adopts college and career-ready state standards, aligned statewide annual assessments, and a state accountability system” (The Education Trust, 2015). On May 5, 2015, the AAUW, NAACP, and NCLR again signed a joint statement, this time along with the National Urban League (NUL), Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights (LCCHR), and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), denouncing the growing movement by parents and students to ‘opt-out’ of (i.e. refuse to take part in) standardized testing (Simpson, 2015). Here the signatories argue that the data generated by standardized tests are “critical for understanding whether and where there is equal opportunity” and argue that parents who choose to ‘opt-out’ of these tests are “inadvertently making a choice to undermine efforts to improve schools for every child” (ibid).

While these civil rights organizations have found common ground in the narrative of the education reform movement – and the importance it places on standardized testing, in particular – the author was unable to locate any documents jointly issued by the same groups similarly demanding legislation capable of increasing the minimum wage, rebuilding the social safety net, or ending race- and class-based residential segregation. This is notable, because while educational researchers have thoroughly demonstrated the detrimental impacts that poverty and de facto segregation have on educational outcomes (e.g. Berliner, 2006; Berliner, 2013; Chetty et al, 2015; Dahl & Lochner, 2012; Morsy & Rothstein, 2015; Reardon, 2011; Shonkoff et al, 2011), the idea that standardized tests improve educational outcomes is supported by little more than claims made to that effect by self-styled education reformers.

⁶ Examples include the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) (see <http://www.alec.org/publications/report-card-on-american-education/>), and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (see <http://www.uschamberfoundation.org/center-education-and-workforce>).

⁷ Examples include The Georgetown Center on Education and Workforce (which receives significant funding from the Gates Foundation), the Center on Re-inventing Public Education at the University of Washington (also heavily funded by Gates), the University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform (funded by the Walton Family Foundation), and Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes.

⁸ The U.S.’s largest media outlets are generally sympathetic to the cause of education reform, and tend to publish stories carrying its narrative. A number of these outlets have launched special initiatives and series meant to cover educational issues in greater detail, such as NBC’s “Education Nation,” NPR’s “npr Ed,” and CNN’s “Schools of Thought” blog. A number of journalists at prominent outlets have made education a regular topic of their columns. Paul Tough (2013) formerly of *Harper’s Magazine*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *This American Life*, and Jay Mathews (2009), a columnist at the *Washington Post* for several decades, have written books on the subject. Campbell Brown, former anchor for the Cable News Network (CNN), founded the Parents Transparency Project in 2013 and the Partnership for Educational Justice in 2014 – both of which have focused their efforts on criticizing teachers unions through a series of op-eds, and pressuring state departments of education to eliminate existing

teacher tenure and dismissal policies by organizing lawsuits in which the parents of school children to serve as plaintiffs against state governments. Brown more recently launched an education news website titled “The Seventy Four” (referring to the approximately 74 million children under 18 currently living in the U.S.) in 2015, which “aims to challenge the status quo” in public education (by, ironically, aligning its reporting with a narrative that has dominated educational discourse for at least three decades, and that is supported by many of the U.S.’s most influential individuals and groups).

⁹ Davis Guggenheim’s award-winning and highly publicized documentary *Waiting for “Superman”* (2011), tells the story of five children who hope to win a spot at a ‘high performing’ charter school and thereby escape the public schools that, the viewer is led to believe, will inevitably fail to prepare them for the hyper-competitive labor market they will eventually encounter as young adults. As the film’s narrator, Guggenheim states unequivocally that underperforming public schools – rather than, say, industrial flight and the resulting depletion of urban tax bases (Sugrue, 2005), racialized suburbanization (Davis, 1992), secular wage stagnation for all but top level earners (Mishel et al, 2015), or the state’s gradual divestment from social reproduction (Katz, 2008) – are responsible for the difficult circumstances facing those living in the U.S.’s poorest urban neighborhoods. The film’s takeaway is that charter schools offer children from these neighborhoods a better chance at upward mobility than conventional public schools because the former are typically exempt from collective bargaining agreements between teachers unions and school districts, which allegedly make it virtually impossible to remove inept/indifferent teachers from public school classrooms. Filmmaker M. Night Shyamalan has also recently taken up the cause of education reform (see Wolfe, 2013). The subtitle of his 2013 book on the subject – *The Unlikely Story of How a Moonlighting Movie Maker Learned the Five Keys to Closing America's Education Gap* – exemplifies the confidence with which individuals not trained as educators or educational researchers have nevertheless professed authoritative knowledge on the topic.

¹⁰ Examples include musician John Legend (2010), actress Eva Longoria (see Carrero, 2013), former professional basketball player and coach Isaiah Thomas (2013), and comedian, actress, and talk show host Whoopi Goldberg (see Summers, 2014).

¹¹ Affiliates of the education reform movement typically cite the test score gap between white students and black/Hispanic students on standardized tests administered within the U.S., and the fact that the U.S. typically ranks somewhere in the middle of its peers on internationally administered standardized tests, as evidence that the U.S. public education system is both unjust and dangerously ineffective (e.g. Banchemo, 2013; Chappell, 2013; Layton, 2013). There are several problems with this. First, while domestic test score gaps do indeed exist, the U.S. Department of Education’s own reports indicate that they have been closing since the 1970s, with black and Hispanic students’ scores having increased much faster than those of white students over this period (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Second, while the U.S. does indeed rank near the middle of its peers on international tests, it also has one of the highest rates of childhood poverty among countries tested. This is significant because, in all countries tested, students from low-income families score lower than students from high-income families. This would suggest that the inability of the U.S.’s political and economic institutions to reduce poverty and inequality deserve at least as much blame for U.S. test score rankings as its educational institutions (Carnoy & Rothstein, 2013). Third, the numerical differences separating the countries’ average test scores are often quite small, and many are statistically insignificant (Lowell & Salzman, 2007), meaning that the U.S.’s rank is essentially nominal. And finally, the U.S. has never ranked near the top of the international test score rankings, even during periods of rapid and sustained economic growth (Ravitch, 2013).

¹² Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) directs federal funding to state departments of education and local school districts, which then allot these funds to schools serving a high percentage of students from low-income households. As of the 2010-11 school year, more than two-thirds of all public schools in the U.S. received Title I funds (Keaton, 2012). The program, originally conceived of as a means of closing the funding gap between schools in wealthy and poor neighborhoods, has been used for the last fourteen years as a carrot with which to bring state and local school districts in line with the priorities of the education reform movement – specifically, increasing the number of charter schools in operation, and tying teacher compensation and employment to the scores earned by their students on standardized exams. The No Child Left Behind Act, passed in 2001 as a re-authorization of the original ESEA, requires all schools receiving Title I funding to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) on state-administered standardized test. The amount of “progress” considered “adequate” for a given year was left up

to state-level departments of education, with the stipulation that the yearly rates be set such that all students (i.e. 100% of them) would score at or above “proficient” in math and reading by 2014. Schools failing to make “adequate” “progress” towards this goal for consecutive years were required to submit to one of NCLB’s proscribed “corrective” actions, which could involve allowing students to attend a different school, firing school faculty and staff, closing the school, turning the school into a charter school, turning the school over to a private management company, or turning the school over to the state – depending on how many years in a row the school had failed to make AYP. Due to widespread, bipartisan disdain for the law and the growing recognition that few, if any, schools would be 100% “proficient” by 2014, the Obama Administration began to grant NCLB ‘flexibility’ waivers to state departments of education in 2011. These waivers gave states greater say in how their Title I funds were used, and suspended the requirement that states impose “corrective actions” on schools failing to make AYP. In order to receive a waiver and/or have it renewed each year, however, states were required to show that they were using standardized test scores to evaluate principals and teachers using standardized test score data. States unable to demonstrate this had their waivers expire, and were required to resume compliance with NCLB (e.g. Emma, 2014).

¹³ ...or the genocide of indigenous populations, or slavery, or Jim Crow, or the use of nuclear weapons on civilian populations, etc.

¹⁴ Tax-funded redistributive mechanisms (e.g. food stamps, housing subsidies, cash assistance) directly provide supplemental resources to poor families, immediately and directly mitigating the worst effects of poverty. The translation of educational attainment into material wellbeing, on the other hand, is eventual rather than immediate, and depends on global/national/local economic trends, the effects of technological development on educational requirements in the labor market, the decisions made by other actors when choosing an occupational field, and compatibility between the individual and the requirements of in-demand jobs.

¹⁵ Even the increase in Real Median Household Income pales in comparison to productivity growth over the last few decades. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Real Median Household Income grew by roughly 10% between 1984 (the earliest year available in the data made available online) and 2014. Even without the numerical data from Bivens & Mishel (2013) (see Graph 1), it is clear that 10% is far less than the growth in labor productivity (the dark blue line) between 1984 and 2014. See: <https://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/series/MEHOINUSA672N>.

¹⁶ The productivity and compensation data graphed on this chart are for “production/non-supervisory” workers (a Bureau of Labor Statistics category), who make up roughly 80% of the private sector workforce in the U.S. The researchers at the Economic Policy Institute who produced the chart exclude management from these calculations in order to prevent the immense gains that top-earners in management positions (executives, etc.) have made over the last few decades from obscuring the ‘decoupling’ that has occurred for the more “typical” worker.

¹⁷ Based on the author’s calculations using GDP per capita data from the World Bank at (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>) and household income data from the U.S. Census Bureau (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/inequality/index.html>). Both have been converted to 2013 dollars using the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator, found at (<http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>).

¹⁸ When companies buy back a significant amount of the stock they have issued, the value of each share that remains outstanding increases because (a) each outstanding share now represents a larger claim on the company’s earnings; and (b) the purchase itself acts as a positive signal about the company to the market and ratings agencies, attracting new investors. To prevent companies from artificially manipulating their stock price in this fashion, the U.S. government began governing the timing and scale of stock buybacks with the Securities Exchange Act of 1934. But in 1982, as part of the great neoliberal ‘roll-back’ of regulations governing the private sector, officials appointed to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission by Ronald Reagan adopted Rule 10b-18, which greatly relaxed the rules governing stock buybacks. This paved the way for the so-called “shareholder revolution,” through which so-called activist investors purchased large interests in firms, and then used this leverage to push their managers to create short term returns for shareholders through, among other things, massive stock buybacks. In the wake of the “shareholder revolution,” it has been common for the U.S.’s largest corporations to use their profits, and in some cases even *borrow* money, to buy back stock and to pay out dividends instead of reinvesting this capital in the

expansion of their enterprise or in the acquisition of assets meant to sustain or improve long-term its performance (Lazonick, 2014; Mason, 2015). The growing emphasis on extracting wealth from firms in order to enrich wealthy shareholders and top executives (who are increasingly compensated in stock) in the short-term comes at the expense of workers who depend on the long-term viability of the firm that employs them, and those who would benefit from an expansion in employment opportunities (ibid).

¹⁹ Between 1970 and 2013, GDP per capita in the US grew 68.179%. Over this period, the ratio of household income at the 95th percentile to household income at the 20th percentile grew from just over 6:1 to just over 9:1. The ratio of household income at the 95th percentile to household income at the 40th percentile grew from just over 3:1 to just under 5:1. To further illustrate the shortcomings of the conventional wisdom on the relationship between GDP per capita growth and shared prosperity, consider the following. The fastest single-year rate of GDP per capita growth during the 1970 to 2013 period was between 1983 and 1984, at 5.541%. In that year, incomes for households at the 20th percentile grew by 1.986%. Assuming for the moment that there is indeed a causal relationship between GDP growth and household income growth at all points along the socioeconomic spectrum, that the proportional relationship between GDP per capita growth on aggregate and household income growth at the 20th percentile is consistent across time, and that somehow the 1983-1984 rate of GDP growth could be maintained indefinitely, it would still take 47 years for household income at the 20th percentile to even reach what the median (i.e. 50th percentile) household income was in the U.S. in 2013 (and obviously this would no longer even be the median household income in 2060). GDP data were taken from the World Bank's World Development Indicators database (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>). Household income data were taken from the U.S. Census Bureau at (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/inequality/index.html>).

²⁰ Cowen and Smith describe this as a shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics.

²¹ Examples of this include the Morrill Act of 1862, which granted federal land to individual states, provided that these states establish colleges offering courses in military tactics; the creation of the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) in public colleges, and the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) in public high schools; and the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) (1958), which set aside a then-unprecedented amount of federal money to subsidize student loans and provide grants to states looking to revamp math, science, and foreign language instruction in their secondary schools in order to ensure that the defense industries, intelligence agencies, and diplomatic institutions were provided with well-trained workers.

²² As a further indication that the frame through which threats to 'national security' are now processed emphasizes the geoeconomic aspects of international relations, Obama recently said that while the extremist group ISIS that has drawn so much attention as of late "can hurt our people and our families," it "is not an organization that can destroy the United States" because it is not a "huge industrial power," and therefore cannot affect the U.S. "institutionally or in a systemic way" (Kelly, 2015).

²³ Duncan has reciprocated in speeches of his own by citing Friedman's "flat world" theory when laying out the dire consequences awaiting nations that fail to take steps to ensure that their education systems are compatible with the demands of the "knowledge economy" (Duncan, 2010; 2013b).

²⁴ According to the U.S. State Department (<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/224833.htm>), a total of 35 U.S. citizens were killed, injured, or kidnapped as a result of foreign "terrorism" between 2001 and 2013. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, there were an average of 49 reported lightning fatalities *each year* between 1984 and 2013 (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2015). According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, there were 416 fatalities from furniture or appliance tip-overs between 2001 and 2013 (Suchy, 2014, Table 10, p. 13).

²⁵ According to recent testimony by James Comey, Director of the F.B.I., "homegrown violent extremists" are indeed considered a key issue on the contemporary security landscape. However, Comey specifies that the agency is primarily concerned with those that have been "radicalized and recruited via the Internet and social media to join ISIL in Syria and Iraq and then return to the U.S. to commit terrorist acts" (Comey, 2015). Absent in Comey's testimony is any discussion of the threats presented to those living in the U.S. by "homegrown violent extremists" "radicalized and recruited" by rightwing groups based *within* the U.S.

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APPENDIX D: Conclusions and Suggested Applications

This dissertation addresses Thiem's call for geographers to "think through" education – that is, to contextualize education by "foregrounding the various political, cultural, and economic projects pursued through its content, governing structures, or modes of distribution" (Thiem, 2009, p. 168). Accordingly, *Paper A* shows that the individuals and groups affiliated with the education reform movement have crafted a narrative that uses cultural cues to assign responsibility for social ills to the groups who suffer from them to the greatest degree, and that this assignation was made possible by the reform movement's rhetorical isolation of the spaces inhabited by these groups from the predations of neoliberal capitalism and the legacy of institutional racism. *Paper B* demonstrates that education oriented around preparing students for the labor market – no matter how effective to that narrow end – is incapable of overcoming the variety of forces inherent to the existing economic system that have led to secular wage stagnation, and that individualizing responsibility for one's material wellbeing is therefore a deeply flawed idea, at best. *Paper C* argues that there is a tendency for the elite to concede the existence of social problems in a way that deliberately misdiagnoses the causes of these problems so as to channel popular disaffection away from the desire to make radical demands. *Paper C* then uses this tendency as a framework for analyzing the contemporary education reform movement's efforts to generate support for its policy agenda by misdiagnosing the causes of inequality/poverty and insecurity as products of an insufficiently productive macro-economy and the alleged erosion of the U.S.'s preparedness to address external threats, respectively.

In sum, the papers above speak to the ways in which public education in the U.S. is a product of wider political and economic trends, how public discourses on public education become entangled in the social production of space, and how elites have discussed schooling as a

means of producing non-insurgent subjects. What follows are some conclusions drawn from these findings, and suggestions about how these conclusions might be put to use in resistance to the education reform movement.

Conclusions

1.) The education reform movement has re-formed public education without reforming it

“Reform” carries with it the connotation that its referent actor is engaged in a good faith effort to improve upon what exists. The efforts of the movement described throughout this dissertation would be more accurately labeled using a hyphenated version of this word, as this variant would reflect the fact that, through the efforts of the individuals and groups scrutinized in the papers above, the educational system in the U.S. has been changed (i.e. formed again) without having been improved. It seems increasingly clear, furthermore, that universally high quality education was never, in fact, the primary objective of the education reform movement.

For one thing, the administrative agenda and pedagogical prescriptions offered by those associated with the movement for low-income, high minority schools have relied less on the informed input of trained/experienced educators and pedagogical experts than on the perspectives of statisticians (e.g. William Sanders, developer of the “value added” approach to test score accountability measurement), economists (e.g. Raj Chetty, whose work has attempted to establish a causal link between ‘teacher quality’ and future student earnings), criminologists (e.g. Kelling and Wilson of ‘broken windows’ fame), psychologists (e.g. Angela Duckworth), and ‘venture philanthropists’ from the technology (e.g. Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg), real estate (e.g. Eli Broad), and retail sectors (e.g. members of the Walton family). In other words, the ideas that circulate within the reform movement have reflected a prioritization of cultivating

disciplined, passive, market subjects (Mitchell, 2003; Katz, 2008) over the promotion of holistic personal and intellectual development.

Moreover, the idea implied by the call for education reform – that the existing system is failing and a new approach is necessary – has been a valuable way to lay the groundwork for schemes that shift money from (at least quasi-democratically controlled) traditional public schools to profit-motivated enterprises (Foster, 2011; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2013) including for-profit charter schools and voucher programs. The latter, which have been repeatedly rejected when subjected to popular referenda at the ballot box and remain quite unpopular with the public (Richardson & Bushaw, 2015), will nevertheless get a large financial boost from president-elect Donald Trump’s nominee for Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos. DeVos, a staunch advocate of ‘school choice’ and whose family bankrolled an unsuccessful effort to change the Michigan state constitution to allow school vouchers there in 2000 (Lawler, 2016), will no doubt seek to carry out Trump’s campaign pledge to divert \$20 billion in Title I funds to a nationwide voucher program, purportedly allowing all students to choose the school they will attend. Though none of the market-based reforms pushed by the reform movement have consistently demonstrated superior effectiveness in comparison to conventional procedures, the wealthy backers of these reforms have constructed a massive think tank-university department-industrial complex through which to “orchestrate” the production and dissemination of research casting such things as charter schools, voucher programs, parent trigger laws, and teacher ‘merit’ pay in a positive light (Lubienski, Brewer & La Londe, 2016).

2.) The education reform movement is motivated by the political utility of appearing to pursue social justice, not a desire to actually realize social justice

The second conclusion that can be drawn from the findings summarized above is that were the education reform movement a sincere effort to pursue social justice, it would have been abandoned by now. Despite the increase in test scores across demographic categories and in the supply of college-educated workers documented in *Paper B*, the U.S. is arguably just as economically and culturally inequitable as it was more than two decades ago when the first charter school law was passed and the dispersal of Title I funds was first made contingent on “adequate yearly progress” towards standardized test score ‘proficiency.’ That schooling’s inadequacy as a replacement for the gradual withdrawal of the Welfare State would be obvious to anyone willing to spend any amount of time comparing the trajectory of educational attainment in the U.S. to that of the labor share of income over the last twenty years (or the distribution of income among races and genders over this period [see Bivens et al, 2014]) indicates that the continual call for education reform is a deliberate, rather than merely uninformed, obfuscation of the sources of injustice and vulnerability in the U.S. The disingenuousness with which the leading lights of the education reform movement continue to position increased educational attainment as the social justice skeleton key makes clear, I contend, that there are ulterior motives driving the movement’s advocacy.

As papers *A* and *B* argue, the rhetoric used to call for education reform has been entirely consistent with the broader tendency of neoliberal governance to individualize responsibility for poverty and unequal vulnerability so as to disguise the roles played by structurally inequitable social arrangements (Amoore, 2004; Lipman, 2004; Martin, 2007; Means, 2011). Individuals – especially, though not exclusively – from historically marginalized and/or oppressed groups are

common targets for reformism both because they suffer social ills with the greatest intensity and because the residue of open prejudice against them can be used to portray their suffering as self-inflicted. Reform is thereby able to play a “therapeutic” role, in Marcuse’s words (1991, p. 107), in the sense that individuals falling into one of these categories are positioned as being in need of rehabilitative or adaptive re/integration into existing social structures. That is, reform becomes a means of adjusting the individual to accommodate status quo social relations, instead of adjusting (or even acknowledging flaws inherent to) status quo social relations, in order to accommodate the individual. The “therapeutic” logic behind the call for education reform also explains the stark divergence between the reform movement’s continual appeals to equitable educational opportunity as a “civil right” and the support by many of its affiliates for pedagogical techniques and disciplinary practices in schools attended primarily by non-wealthy, non-white students that would never be allowed in schools attended primarily by wealthy and/or white students. The overwhelmingly low-income, black and Hispanic student bodies in the “dual instruction” KIPP schools, Democracy Prep schools, and others lauded by those with an interest in maintaining what presently exists is therefore cast by reformers not as separate and unequal treatment, but rather as the best way to ensure that these children – otherwise lacking in “grit” and “character” – are able to integrate themselves into extant social structures.

While there are, no doubt, some mid- and low-level operatives who have affiliated themselves with the education reform movement out of a sincere desire to build a better world, the elites organizing the movement and funding its decision-based evidence-making apparatus (Lubienski, Brewer & La Londe, 2016) have no interest in promoting the radical social and institutional changes that would be necessary to bring this better world about, as their positions of privilege and power are reproduced through social arrangements and institutional architectures

in their present forms (Gramsci, 1971). Thus the effort to present equity and generalized wellbeing as though they were only achievable as byproducts of first shoring up the macro-economy and national (i.e. notional) security state through education reform (see *Paper C*).

3.) Though presented as a novel approach to dealing with persistent inequality that speaks to the uniqueness of current circumstances, contemporary education reform in the U.S. draws on old and widely discredited ideas

Perhaps it should not be surprising that things like “grit,” “character,” and patriotism are increasingly significant parts of the curriculum in low-income, black, and Hispanic public schools (see *Paper A*), because the cultivation of particular sentiments, comportments, and worldviews were among the primary goals of public schooling in the U.S. when the very first government administered systems were established. Historian Michael Katz, for example, has pointed out that the U.S.’s first public school systems were mostly imposed on working class and immigrant communities by government and business elites self-servingly seeking to instill a bourgeois morality, acceptable ‘work ethic,’ and pacifying set of cultural sensibilities among urban youth (Katz, 1971, see also 1976, 2001). Similarly, Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued that the origins of publicly funded, compulsory educational systems in the U.S. lied not in the State’s effort to foster the intellectual development of its citizenry, but rather in the business community’s desire to train and pacify laborers before they arrived on the factory floor.

Additionally, as *Paper A* explains, the education reform movement’s rhetoric bears unmistakable traces of the ‘culture of poverty’ thesis, which is itself ultimately a sanitized manifestation of the same impulses that drove the “scientific racism” and eugenics movements of the early 20th century (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Katz, 1995). The explanations of injustice that characterize the narrative of the education reform movement, in other words, can be traced back

to ideas that would be taboo today. By masking an argument that relies, at base, on a racial essentialism as merely a critique of culture, however, liberal and conservative elites alike have been able to center discussions of what can be done about poverty and inequality “more on pathology than on politics” (Katz, 1995, p. 71).

In short, the novelty attached to contemporary education reform by its advocates should be seen as an attempt to conceal the unsavory genealogy of the world view and belief system that underlie the policies and pedagogical practices it promotes.

Suggested Applications

1.) Counter-space the narrative of the reform movement

Spatial construction has been an important, if underappreciated, component of the education reform movement’s effort to market itself and its policy agenda. It is a sad irony that the only reason the reform movement’s spatialized ‘culture of poverty’ narrative has even superficial plausibility is that black and Hispanic families have been concentrated in certain urban neighborhoods by state policies and corporate initiatives carried out by individuals and organizations from the same social strata as the leaders of the reform movement. The urban segregation that has produced these concentrations didn’t just happen – it is the legacy of the bigotry baked into mid 20th century governmental housing policies, and the ongoing, opportunistic predations of the private sector (Jackson, 1985). The elite, in other words, have literally produced the neglected spaces that they now cast as self-sustainingly pathogenic.

An important element of activism aimed at countering the destructive effects of the education reform movement would be to ensure the existence of a shared understanding that, contrary to the ‘spacing’ project *Paper B* describes, these neighborhoods are not discrete entities, disconnected from the inherent tendencies of broader social structures, and that the suffering

experienced by residents of these neighborhoods is not endogenous to them. Collaboratively produced, localized histories of such phenomena as redlining, white flight, industrial restructuring, and over-policing could be used to develop narratives of dispossession and exploitation that lay bare the flawed and prejudicial narratives used by the education reform movement to build support for its policy agenda. These counter-narratives could then be linked up with other narratives produced in similarly oppressed localities to produce what Katz has called “counter-topographies” (Katz, 2011), expanding the mass and reach of otherwise isolated movements.

Countering the spacing of the reform movement could also involve asking questions about why there are no KIPP schools, no ‘SLANT’ values, no “dual instruction” pedagogical approaches, and no scripted curriculum, in wealthy neighborhoods. Why, in other words, are rigidity and discipline pushed as the best means of delivering opportunity to children from some neighborhoods, while exploration, discovery, and play are offered to children in others?

2.) Recognize that technocratic governance is still governance, which is always-already political

Reform efforts and social movements led by the elite should be seen as political, rather than technocratic, projects. Or, more precisely, critical scholars and activists must remember that reform efforts presented to the public by representatives of the political and/or business classes as technocratic are always-already political (Marcuse, 1991; Miliband, 1969). The selection of education reform to replace the Welfare State, as *Paper B* documents, was not inevitable nor has it been universally beneficial. Instead, it has been a product of the combined influences of class-factional interest and an attendant unwillingness to consider fundamental redistributions of power and wealth.

Though the education reform movement is able to draw political, legislative, financial support from the most powerfully positioned individuals and groups in the U.S., student-led protests (e.g. students have recently walked out in protest against standardized tests in Baltimore and Boston), student and parent-led standardized test ‘opt-outs’ (organized by localized groups such as Opt-Out Philly and The Opt Out Florida Network) explicitly anti-reform teachers’ groups (such as the 80,000 strong Badass Teachers Association), social movement teacher unionism (such as that of the Chicago Teachers Union), and radical educator collectives (such as the New York Collective of Radical Educators) are showing that resistance to its agenda is possible. Growing the ranks of these resistance groups might be accomplished by helping students, parents, teachers, and other parties harmed by the policies of the education reform movement recognize that politically motivated disingenuousness, rather than misguided earnestness, underlies its approach.

3.) Get politically active beyond immediately school-related issues

Consistent with the education reform movement’s downplaying of socio-economic context, a common claim of its prominent affiliates is that improving public schools must be prioritized over policies that directly address poverty because the only/best way to address poverty is through educational improvement (e.g. Cunningham, 2016; Gates, 2011; see also Tough, 2012). This contention is contradicted by actual pediatric research showing that the toxic stress associated with poverty experienced at an early age does lasting damage to one’s capacity to learn and think throughout their life (Shonkoff & Garner, 2011). In other words, prioritizing education over poverty reduction is putting the cart before the horse, at least for students coming from the most adverse home life situations. As *Paper A* explains, these effects of poverty and psycho-social stress have a greater impact on academic achievement than in-school factors such

as teacher quality or school culture (Berliner, 2013), and ‘achievement gap’ between wealthy and poor students has become larger than that between white and non-white students (Reardon, 2011).

Because schools cannot overcome what a profit-motivated healthcare system and a dwindled safety net does to children, those sincerely committed to the cause of social justice, or who are at least interested in improving the educational opportunities and achievement available to disadvantaged students, must push – at the very least – for securely and robustly funded ‘wrap around’ services (e.g. school nurses, social workers, counselors, and psychologists) (see, for example, Chicago Teachers Union, 2012) and nutritional programs in schools. Disrupting the reform movement’s ‘education first, poverty second’ message by publicizing the effects that poverty and the associated toxic stress have on a child’s brain development and capacity to learn will be vital to any effort to generate broad public support for the kinds of programs just listed. Better still would be to connect educational activism up with organizations pushing for generalized increases in social spending, labor rights, and anti-racism beyond school walls.

4.) Promote alternatives to grit

The success with which Angela Duckworth has marketed her conception of “grit” as a necessary component of public school curriculum reflects the popularity of (a) deficit narratives, which cast children from low-income and non-white families as lacking the character traits that supposedly inhere in children from “middle class” and/or white families (Cammara, 2010; 2011), (b) the idea that the appropriate objective of the student is to accumulate canonical knowledge, and (c) the notion that education is an individualized endeavor. Perhaps the most effective opposition to the epistemic violence, one-dimensionality (Marcuse, 1991), and atomization of the grit concept would be to promote alternative ‘soft skills’ such as creativity,

intellectual curiosity, and solidarity. Critical thinking, collaborative skills, and “mutual care for human and non-human others” (Moore et al, 2015, p. 2) ought to be promoted as candidates to replace grit as the curricular supplement to curricular content.

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