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'Training' the Body Politic: Essays on the School Reform Orthodoxy

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‘Training’ the Body Politic:
Essays on the School Reform Orthodoxy

A Dissertation by

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Chapman University

Orange, CA

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

May 2021

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March 2021

‘Training’ the Body Politic:

Essays on the School Reform Orthodoxy

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The collection of essays in this dissertation is mostly a product of outrage. My outrage against the years I've spent immersed in top-down cultures and top-down thinking inside public schools. My outrage against what the system has done to its most disadvantaged students in the name of helping them. My outrage against the Orwellian nature of the 'school accountability' movement and how it has shaped the conventional wisdom about K-12 education in both my profession and the larger culture.

I'm baffled there isn't a clear sense of urgency in schools of education to fight against these issues and resist top-down reforms.

At the same time, I've long seen these essays as *love letters* to critical, heterodox thinkers like Noam Chomsky, Paulo Friere, Peter Senge, Yanis Varoufakis, and Howard Zinn—those who have challenged conventional wisdom in different areas. They're particularly a tribute to those thinkers who've best exposed, in my opinion, what's been happening to the educational system in the past four decades—rebels with a conscience and scholar-activists like David Berliner, Gerald Bracey, Richard Rothstein, and, most recently, Diane Ravitch. These individuals and others have saved my sanity by teaching me what is actually going on in society and within America's schools. It's definitely a paradoxical story and not an easy one to tell. In this collection, I attempt to connect the dots between the interdisciplinary insights I've learned as best I can.

If my journey to this moment were turned into a T-shirt it might look like this:



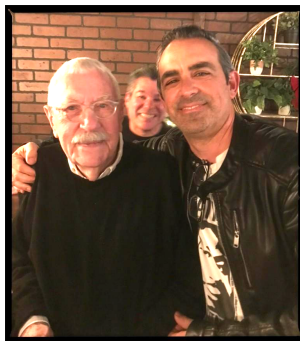
Higher education is often not the supportive, nurturing institution its advocates claim it to be. I was lucky to have a dissertation committee willing to help a lost soul languishing in ABD. My chair, Dr. Scot Danforth, made sure to steer me toward greater coherence before all my coursework, time, and money turned into a long, futile endeavor. I'll never forget his comparison of my narrative voice to the ranting comedian Lewis Black. That seems spot-on. Since I meander quite a bit, I'd like to think of these essays as *Proust meets Lewis Black*.

I want to thank Dr. Penny Bryan, a committee member, who encouraged my writing and art with those *adjectives* we all desperately want to hear from our teachers—the fuel we need to keep striving to succeed.

Finally, I want to thank Dr. Peter McLaren, my third committee member, who kept reminding me that my analysis was missing a critique of capitalism. Although I still disagree with his critique of my critique (since *diversity* in leftist thought is a strength, in my opinion, and grounds for much needed alliance-building rather than polarization), I am convinced that economic literacy is vital in the fight

against oppression and injustice in both K-12 education and the wider society. I also believe that Marxist economists, like Varoufakis and Michael Hudson, are essential teachers for navigating that struggle in the 21st century. Perhaps I'll someday understand how, in a society dominated by regressive politics, a critique of capitalism is *given legs*.

I also want to acknowledge—outside my committee and even university years—the influence of Louis Fox, my high school art teacher (studio and history). He's exactly the type of teacher the standardization and 'accountability' movement in K-12 education has been stifling, quietly demoralizing, and, I imagine, driving out of the profession. *Ravitch thought back to Mrs. Ratliff to compare to present dilemmas while I think back to Mr. Fox*. His irreverent spirit has always been the gold standard in my mind.



I also want to thank Dr. Barbara Tye, a former professor at Chapman University who retired a few years ago and yet still came to my dissertation defense on Zoom. I was so happy to see her. I don't think she knows that some compliments she sent to me via email about a long essay I once wrote strengthened my spirit in immeasurable ways. The ideas in that essay led to the eleven in this collection.

I also must acknowledge Dr. Dawn Hunter, the Co-Director of the Ph.D. program at the Atallah College of Educational Studies at Chapman. I don't think I would have finished my doctoral program if it weren't for her. I'm just not the type of student higher education is designed for, especially while working full-time as a teacher. If I were at the mercy of typical institutional bureaucrats, I would've eventually 'quit' by missing deadlines and with nothing to show for my time but a growing mountain of debt. I can't imagine the psychological toll that would take over the years without at least a Ph.D. in hand. Lucky for me, Dawn is one of those rare angels in academia's leadership who doesn't play "it cool by making the [institution] a little colder." Just the opposite.

There were a few other angels in my life as well. Hanaa and Michael Kaldas, my son Shane's grandparents, were always there to watch him whenever I needed to sit down for some hours and write or attempt it. They even drove long distances when we lived in Orange County to be with their grandson while I headed off to class. I've adopted Hanaa and Michael as my own parent-angels.

Lastly, I want to thank Marie, my ex, Shane's mom, and one of my best friends in the world. No one has listened to my rants about education more than her. Those venting sessions led me to process what I wanted to say without the crutches of jargon and typical academese. Those were the real, unedited Lewis Black sessions—albeit less funny. *Her poor ears.*

DEDICATION

This accomplishment is dedicated to my son, Shane. In his first year of life, I often held him in my arms or pushed him in a stroller while thinking about how to turn my inchoate vision for a dissertation into a reality. For years, I drafted these essays at cafes and inside the eyesore of a mall's food court area after leaving work. The whole time I tended to feel anxious to be near my son before the countdown of the evening hours got too close to bedtime. I often worried about how present I was with him during the workweek with such a depleted *cognitive bandwidth* by the time I got home. I hope I made up for it with affection.

And so, I hope I can look back 10 or so years from now and say that my doctorate helped me to give my son a better life. There's so much talk about measurement in my profession and so much discounting of the *less tangible*. Doubtless, a better life for ourselves and loved ones is the measurement that matters most.

To me, there are no words more important in the English language than these: I love you, Shane. *You are my life.*

ABSTRACT

‘Training’ the Body Politic:

Essays on the School Reform Orthodoxy

by Jahan Naghshineh

These essays represent my attempt to grapple with fundamental questions about what I see as the upside-down nature of educational reforms in American society. Why is there a never-ending crisis in America’s public schools? What does it mean when the educational specter from different periods of history is discredited and yet the specter keeps being recycled decade after decade? For example, elites propagated crisis narratives to galvanize support for the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation at the turn of the century. Countless researchers then documented the adverse impacts of NCLB on America’s schools and yet that literature never led to an acknowledgment from elite reformers about the *crises* generated by top-down solutions to the specter of crisis. I argue that the American public is still under the spell cast by the most successful iteration of that specter, which is the publication of the landmark federal report, *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR), in 1983. ANAR convinced the public that ‘bad schools’ were posing an existential threat to our nation’s economic well-being. ANAR provided no explanation of what actually caused the worst economic recessions at the time (1980-82) since the Great Depression, but it channeled an inchoate anxiety in the population towards scapegoating

schools. ANAR also failed to inform the public about research on the connections between socioeconomic disadvantages (SEDs) and student achievement on standardized tests.

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Essay 1: Introduction, A World Turned Upside-Down

“By any measure, NCLB was a failure in raising academic performance and narrowing gaps in opportunity and outcomes. But by very publicly measuring the test results against arbitrary benchmarks that no real schools have ever met, NCLB succeeded in creating a narrative of failure that shaped a decade of attempts to ‘fix’ schools while blaming those who work in them.”¹

Stan Karp

“What do politicians talk about when they talk about schools? They talk about how the schools are in crisis and their plans—usually not based on any research—to fix them.”²

Joel Spring

“Educational reform is a euphemism for the destruction of public education.”³

Noam Chomsky

“In each case, the politicians' motives were suspect. Their reflex reaction, when faced with a national crisis, is to assign guilt to persons with the least power to hit back. The schools... fill the bill of emergency whipping boy.”⁴

Fred Hechinger

“So many people have said so often that the schools are bad that it is no longer a debatable proposition subject to empirical proof. It has become an assumption. But it is an assumption that turns out to be false.”⁵

Gerald Bracey

¹ Karp, S. (2020, June 5). *ESSA: NCLB repackaged*. Rethinking Schools. <https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/essa-nclb-repackaged/>

² Spring, J. (2011). *The politics of American education*. Taylor & Francis.

³ Chomsky, N. in Berliner, D. C., & Glass, G. V. (Eds.). (2014). *50 myths and lies that threaten America's public schools: The real crisis in education*. Teachers College Press.

⁴ Milder, L., & Braddock, J. (2012). *Hello! my name is public school, and I have an image problem*. iUniverse.

⁵ Bracey, G. in Preston, T. (2019). Education in the media, as seen in Kappan. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 101(4), 5-7.

At one point in my studies as a graduate student I asked myself why is there a never-ending educational crisis in America's public schools? Politicians and media pundits have been castigating America's schools as "failing," "broken," "mediocre," "inferior," and in "crisis" since I started teaching in the late 1990s, but I suspected these mantras started much earlier. These crisis narratives helped launch the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001; a top-down reform policy lasting until 2015 which numerous scholars and educators have criticized as damaging to disastrous for students, teachers, and America's schools.⁶ For example, there is documentation in the research literature about how NCLB negatively impacted economically disadvantaged students, minorities (Blacks, Latinx, Native Americans), students with disabilities, English language learners, gifted students, students in rural communities, and even kindergartners and preschoolers.⁷

⁶ Apple, M. W. (2007). Ideological success, educational failure? On the politics of no child left behind. *Journal of teacher education*, 58(2), 108-116; Brulle, A. R. (2005). What can you say when research and policy collide?. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86(6), 433-437; Cawelti, G. (2006). The side effects of NCLB. *Educational Leadership*, 64(3), 64; Croft, S. J., Roberts, M. A., & Stenhouse, V. L. (2015). The perfect storm of education reform: High-stakes testing and teacher evaluation. *Social Justice*, 70-92; Kavanagh, K. M., & Fisher-Ari, T. R. (2020). Curricular and pedagogical oppression: Contradictions within the juggernaut accountability trap. *Educational Policy*, 34(2), 283-311; Kauffman, J. M., & Konold, T. R. (2007). Making sense in education: Pretense (including no child left behind) and realities in rhetoric and policy about schools and schooling. *Exceptionality*, 15(2), 75-96; Merchant, G. J. (2004). What is at stake with high stakes testing? A discussion of issues and research. *Ohio Journal of Science*, 104(2), 2-7; Nichols, S. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2007). *Collateral damage: How high-stakes testing corrupts America's schools*. Harvard Education Press; Ohanian, S., & Kovacs, P. (2007). Make room at the table for teachers. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 89(4), 270-272; Poetter, T. S., Wegwert, J. C., & Haerr, C. (2006). No Child Left Behind and the illusion of reform: Critical essays by educators; Ravitch, D. (2016). *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*. Basic Books; Schoen, L., & Fusarelli, L. D. (2008). Innovation, NCLB, and the fear factor: The challenge of leading 21st-century schools in an era of accountability. *Educational Policy*, 22(1), 181-203.; Tanner, D. (2013). Race to the top and leave the children behind. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 45(1), 4-15.

⁷Altshuler, S. J., & Schmutz, T. (2006). No Hispanic student left behind: The consequences of "high stakes" testing. *Children & Schools*, 28(1), 5-14; Darling-Hammond, L. (2007). Race, inequality and educational accountability: The irony of 'no child left behind'. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 10(3), 245-260; DellaMattera, J. (2010). No preschooler left behind: Preschool policies in the NCLB world. *Journal of Educational Research & Policy Studies*, 10(1), 35-49; Johnson, J., & Howley, C. B. (2015). Contemporary federal education policy and rural schools: A critical policy analysis. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 90(2), 224-241; McCarty, T. L. (2008). American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian education in the era of standardization and NCLB—An introduction. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 1-9; McLeskey, J., & Waldron, N. L. (2011, March 31). *Full inclusion programs for elementary students with learning disabilities: Can they meet student needs in an era of high stakes accountability?* ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED529797>; Neill, M. (2003). Leaving children behind: How no child left behind will fail our children. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85(3), 225-228; Rose, L. C. (2007). The sad saga of NCLB. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 89(1), 2; Stipek, D. (2006). No child left behind comes to preschool. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(5), 455-466; Yee, M. (2015). What English language learners have to say about NCLB testing. *Teachers College Record*, 117(13), 19-38.

Isn't it strange that a national policy predicated on *solving* a crisis could produce so many adverse consequences within schools? How is that irony not an established cultural touchstone by now—readily referenced by pundits? How hasn't it disqualified the federal government as honest brokers or competent ones in the realm of educational reforms? As far as I can tell, this Orwellian situation hasn't become well-established in the public mind even after elites admitted that NCLB turned into a “toxic brand”⁸ in the popular culture, which, incidentally, makes destructive policies sound more like a public relations problem than a failure of leadership.

Isn't it revealing that as these destructive effects became known to researchers, politicians never felt obligated to alert the public to the dangers of their own solutions to the so-called crisis in schools? Unsurprisingly, the federal government's destructive response was never described as a ‘wake-up call’ to the nation, just like so many of their alarmist messages about “failing” schools. *No wake-up call about the wake-up call.* Politicians were silent about that particular crisis no matter how much research evidence piled up—in neglected academic databases—increasingly reinforcing the counterclaim.

Accountability has been one of the most common elite buzz words for decades, but I never heard elites admit that there's a need for accountability at the top when researchers and critics pointed out the destructive effects of reforms year after year (especially on the most disadvantaged students). It brings

⁸ Spellings, M., & Wertheimer, L. (2010, March 17). *Spellings: “No child left behind” is a “toxic brand.”* NPR. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124758597>

to mind the words of Peter Senge, the systems thinker, who wrote that in the context of organizational change, “The cure can be worse than the disease.”⁹

And what if the *disease* was misdiagnosed in the first place—and every decade since? In that case, the disease—essentially, ‘bad schools’ or low test scores, to use elites’ framing of the issue—is *not* the real problem that needs to be addressed. Or, that framing prevents the public from grasping the factors that most influence positive outcomes within schools. In other words, wrong diagnoses keep the public mind preoccupied with the wrong issues—red herrings. Further, the cures imposed to treat those problems just neglect the real issues while also causing problems of their own.

What if Diane Ravitch, the educational historian, is right when she says that, “Public education is in a crisis only so far as society is”?¹⁰ What then could be the real societal crisis or crises reflected in our schools—reflected in test scores? What could be the societal crisis that elites ingeniously *reframe* as a crisis emanating from “broken” schools when, in fact, it originates outside of them and some schools are just mirroring it back in the form of low test scores?

When I came across Richard Rothstein’s book, *The Way We Were? The Myths and Realities of Student Achievement*, and Gerald Bracey’s *Education Hell: Rhetoric Vs. Reality*, I discovered that the cultural narratives of educational crisis have been circulating in public discourse since the late 1800s! That’s much further back than I first imagined. Thus, from this perspective, public schools have been

⁹ Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Currency.

¹⁰ Ravitch, D. (2013). *Reign of error: The hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America’s public schools*. Vintage.

scapegoated for more than a century for different crises affecting society; using manufactured ones to distract from the real issues. Two of the most influential iterations of “educational crisis” were in the late 1950s, in the wake of the Sputnik hysteria, and in the early 1980s, due to the federal report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform*, that “burst upon the country like a summer storm.”¹¹

“I can’t decide if we have been living in Orwell’s world or Lewis Carroll’s, but it was a world turned upside-down in any case.”¹²

Gerald Bracey

“A reexamination of the impact of Sputnik on American education is not only interesting in its own right but also provides additional support for the revisionists’ claim that educational reform is never undertaken primarily in the interests of youth but rather in the interests of preserving the existing social order, and that the young are viewed by their elders not primarily as ends in themselves but as so many pawns to be played in the game of maintaining that order.”¹³

Jeffrey Herold

History demonstrates that the specter of educational crisis has been weaponized in our society time and again, and perhaps it’s often because “cures” need to be imposed. It seems elites—unaccountable though in power—need to impose solutions on perpetually scapegoated schools, but what is this duplicitous game all about? And how do we describe this type of political situation that’s been going

¹¹ Bell, Terrell H. cited in Symcox, L. (2002). *Whose history?: The struggle for national standards in American classrooms*. Teachers College Press.

¹² Bracey, G. W. (2009). *Education bell: Rhetoric vs. reality* (1st Edition). Editorial Projects in Education.

¹³ Herold, J. (1974, September 1). *Sputnik in American education: A history and reappraisal*. McGill Journal of Education. <https://mje.mcgill.ca/article/view/6971>

on for more than a century? Orwellian seems an understatement. Is it Machiavellian? Kafkaesque? Something out of the topsy-turvy world of Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland*? How much are things not the way they seem?

“Elected in the midst of a crushing economic crisis brought on by a decade of orgiastic deregulation and unchecked greed, Obama had a clear mandate to rein in Wall Street and remake the entire structure of the American economy. What he did instead was ship even his most marginally progressive campaign advisers off to various bureaucratic Siberias, while packing the key economic positions in his White House with the very people who caused the crisis in the first place.”¹⁴

Matt Taibbi, *Common Dreams*

In 2009, the Obama administration took the reins of power in Washington D.C. in the wake of the worst global financial crisis (2007-2008) and recession since the Great Depression (1929 - 1938), and yet Arne Duncan, Obama's Secretary of Education, declared: “We're not just facing an economic crisis here in America. I'm absolutely convinced we are facing an education crisis as well.”¹⁵ Consider those words as clues as to how the educational specter is weaponized in our own times. Imagine those words being uttered by a Cabinet Secretary in the Hoover administration in the early 1930s as economies around the world were collapsing and unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and mass hunger were devastating the lives of millions of people. Imagine President Roosevelt's New Deal focused primarily on holding schools more accountable for higher test scores rather than financial regulations (e.g., the

¹⁴ Taibbi, M. (2009, December 13). *Obama's big sellout: The president has packed his economic team with wall street insiders*. Common Dreams.

<https://www.commondreams.org/news/2009/12/13/obamas-big-sellout-president-has-packed-his-economic-team-wall-street-insiders>

¹⁵ Bracey, G. W. (2009). *Education hell: Rhetoric vs. reality* (1st Edition). Editorial Projects in Education.

Glass-Steagall Act of 1933), unemployment relief, progressive taxation, a minimum wage, funding public works projects, and the safety net of social security.¹⁶ The idea seems nonsensical.

Duncan’s conflation of these two issues—economics and education—makes sense in our own era because we live in a time in which political and corporate elites have hammered home the idea that one should look no further than failing schools to understand the causes of poverty, income inequality, and economic distress rather than scrutinizing the failures of government policies or norms in the corporate sector, including Wall Street. I would also argue this framing reinforces the unconscious belief that job markets are natural, apolitical phenomena—beyond questioning or radical policy modification.

To make matters worse, the mainstream media tend to amplify crisis narratives about schools while failing to build a cultural literacy in the body politic for understanding government policy choices and their effects on ordinary people.

For example, how well did mainstream news outlets explain to the public the causes of the global financial crisis in 2008? How many viewers became acquainted with the handful of heterodox economists who predicted the crash—like Michael Hudson, Steve Keen, and Ann Pettifor—or did the media just turn to their usual pundits and misguided economists? How many in our culture learned about the practice bankers call “equity stripping” and “negative amortization”?¹⁷ How well do we

¹⁶ The Living New Deal. (2019, August 28). *What was the new deal?* Living New Deal. <https://livingnewdeal.org/what-was-the-new-deal/>

¹⁷ Smith, H. (2012). *Who stole the American dream?*. Random House Incorporated.

understand “reverse redlining”¹⁸ and the “junk mortgage game”¹⁹? When presented with the billionaire investor Warren Buffet’s metaphor about Wall Street derivatives as “financial weapons of mass destruction,”²⁰ did the media flesh out that idea to educate the public about derivatives and their destructive effects? How well did they explain the deregulation of the financial industry that led to the crisis, including the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act during the Clinton administration? Why was there never enough pressure put on politicians to reinstate Glass-Steagall after the financial crisis?

Further, how well did the media explain the regulatory weakness of the federal government’s response to the financial crisis, the Dodd-Frank Act of 2010, which was partially repealed through bipartisan legislation in 2018?

Policy blindness seems to pervade our public discourse due to the media’s preference for personality over policy, talking points over depth; not to mention the media’s bias toward what Jon Stewart, the comedian, described as “sensationalism, laziness... [and] light fluff.”²¹ Elite-hyped specters might be added to that list as well.

It seems that, in recent decades, an extremely consequential convergence transpired between the never-ending “crisis” in America’s schools and a shift in federal policy that, to my knowledge, has never

¹⁸ Massey, D. S., & Rugh, J. S. (2018). The great recession and the destruction of minority wealth.

¹⁹ Smith, H. (2012). *Who stole the American dream?*. Random House Incorporated.

²⁰ Stiglitz, J., & Goodman, A. (2010, February 18). *Nobel economist Joseph Stiglitz on Obama’s stimulus plan, debt, climate change, and “freefall: America, free markets, and the sinking of the world economy.”* Democracy Now! https://www.democracynow.org/2010/2/18/nobel_economist_joseph_stiglitz_on_obamas

²¹ Stewart, J. (2017, April 24). *Jon Stewart: Sensationalism in the media*. The Daily Beast. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/jon-stewart-sensationalism-in-the-media>

been explained in the mainstream media. In fact, I've never even heard it brought up at the four different schools of education I've attended. The scholars Harvey Kantor and Robert Lowe describe that shift as one from "the idea that the federal government [is] responsible for ensuring the economic security and welfare of its citizens,"²² best exemplified in the U.S. by the New Deal initiatives during the Great Depression, to one where the government emphasizes educational reform as its primary anti-poverty program. Despite the implementation of social protections like Medicare and Medicaid, Kantor and Lowe argue that this shift began with the Johnson administration's Great Society and 'War on Poverty' reforms. It's a shift from the ideas of the modern *welfare state*, like those "erected in northern and western Europe" after World War II, to the idea of "compensatory education"²³ as society's best means for addressing poverty and inequality.²⁴

It might also help us to understand this paradigm shift as the *repositioning* of accountability; from the public holding the government accountable for improving societal well-being through policy interventions (think of President Roosevelt telling progressive activists: "You've convinced me. Now go out and make me do it."²⁵) to the government holding schools accountable for societal well-being as measured by standardized test scores. Does anyone doubt which vision of government is preferable to political elites, particularly since the 1980s when President Reagan championed the ideology that

²² Kantor, H. & Lowe, R. (2016). *Learning from the Federal Market? Based Reforms: Lessons for ESSA*. (Mathis, W. J., & Trujillo, T. M., Eds.). IAP.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Dreier, P. (2009, September 10). "Got out and make me do it." Common Dreams. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2009/09/10/got-out-and-make-me-do-it>

“excessive government spending on social welfare was the chief cause of the nation’s economic problems”)?²⁶

“We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence.”²⁷

President F.D. Roosevelt in 1944

“Last year, McKinsey & Company released an analysis which concluded that America's failure to close achievement gaps had imposed—and here I quote—‘the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession’.”²⁸

Arne Duncan

“We’re never going to fix poverty in America until we fix education.”²⁹

Joel Klein

“American workers are struggling in large part because they are underpaid—and they are underpaid because 40 years of trickle-down policies have rigged the economy in favor of wealthy people like me. Americans are more highly educated than ever before, but despite that, and despite nearly record-low unemployment, most American workers—at all levels of educational attainment—have seen little if any wage growth since 2000.”³⁰

Nick Hanauer

²⁶ Kantor, H. & Lowe, R. (2016). *Learning from the Federal Market? Based Reforms: Lessons for ESSA*. (Mathis, W. J., & Trujillo, T. M., Eds.). IAP.

²⁷ Roosevelt, F. D. (1944, January 11). *The economic bill of rights*. US History.Org. https://www.ushistory.org/documents/economic_bill_of_rights.htm

²⁸ Duncan, A. (2010, December 7). *Secretary Arne Duncan’s remarks at OECD’s release of the program for international student assessment (PISA) 2009 results | U.S. department of education*. U.S. Department of Education. <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/secretary-arne-duncans-remarks-oecd-release-program-international-student-assessment->

²⁹ Klein, J. (2014, July 29). *Joel Klein on education and poverty*. Children’s Scholarship Fund. <https://scholarshipfund.org/joel-klein-on-education-and-poverty/>

³⁰ Hanauer, N. (2021, January 20). *Better public schools won’t fix income inequality*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/07/education-isnt-enough/590611/>

“There is little income mobility—the notion of America as a land of opportunity is a myth.”³¹

Joseph Stiglitz

But what does it mean that “educational reform has [become] the federal government’s favored solution to poverty”³² and economic distress *amid* the never-ending state of “crisis” in America’s schools? I have yet to find a community struggling with this type of Machiavellian or Orwellian dilemma in the graduate schools I’ve attended. What does it mean? What *has it meant* for decades? For students in our society? Teachers? Families? For the role of test scores in our thinking about educational quality? For the possibility of actually improving societal well-being? What has it meant for the role of government in an age of widening inequality? What does it mean for the real economy? For the expanding low-wage sector? For democracy?

It doesn’t surprise me that mainstream news outlets ignore these critical issues, but I don’t understand how academia can neglect them as much as it seems from my own vantage points as a graduate student, teacher, and citizen. How can schools of education neglect this problem when the government appears to be using schools to evade its democratic responsibility to the public? Where’s the collective expression of outrage among these graduate schools? How would most Americans feel if they understood the implications of this convenient shift in policy interventions?

³¹ Stiglitz, J. E. (2012). *The price of inequality: How today's divided society endangers our future*. WW Norton & Company.

³² Kantor, H. & Lowe, R. (2016). *Learning from the Federal Market? Based Reforms: Lessons for ESSA*. (Mathis, W. J., & Trujillo, T. M., Eds.). IAP.

What does it mean to champion schools as a cure-all for problems like poverty while castigating them as failing from one decade to the next and imposing adverse reforms on them? It seems to mean that as long as political elites can deflect attention from their own economic policy agendas using the specter of educational crisis and the notion that schools (not government) is the primary institution responsible for societal well-being, then economic distress will continue to wreak havoc in our society. Why? Because that specter allows elites to pursue economic policies that negatively impact the vast majority of the population, but particularly the least advantaged—those living the most precarious lives, the ones the mainstream media ignore so well. It allows elites to pursue the *opposite* course that the New Deal exemplifies (despite its discriminatory flaws); that is, the specter helps elites to run an *activist* government, but an activism for the wealthy and powerful. Some critical thinkers, like Howard Zinn, the late dissident historian, might argue that U.S. history shows that such plutocratic “activism” is the unexamined norm in our society, particularly in the absence of significant bottom-up pressure on elected officials.

“Black neighborhoods were blanketed with billboards and posters offering to turn their homes into ready cash. Black zip codes were saturated with bulk mail offering loans with no down payments and low teaser rates. Telephone exchanges linked to black neighborhoods (the first three digits after the area code) were deluged with recorded and personal calls offering to help customers “build wealth.”

Black business owners were paid to turn client lists over to mortgage brokers, and black clergy were induced to vouch for their lending services in return for contributions.”³³

Douglas Massey & Jacob Rugh

“In the New Mortgage Game, brokers had the whip hand. As the frontline salespeople promoting junk mortgages, they were point of contact with buyers, scouring phone books and ethnic groups, finding borrowers, hawking loans.”³⁴

Hedrick Smith

After around eight years of the destructive effects of NCLB on schools, the Obama administration hoped to persuade Americans that low standardized test scores *still* constituted a crisis and one comparable to the global financial crisis in 2008 and the turmoil that followed—the Great Recession. According to the *Harvard Business Review*, the Federal Reserve Board itself stated that “the [latter] crisis cost *every single American* approximately \$70,000.”³⁵ The Institute for Research on Labor and Employment at U.C. Berkeley reported that the Great Recession “led to some of the highest recorded rates of unemployment and home foreclosures in the U.S. since the Great Depression.”³⁶ How is it that political elites can talk about children doing badly on bubble tests in the same breath as the bursting of the housing market bubble and the destructive force of the Great Recession? More than 7

³³ Massey, D. S., & Rugh, J. S. (2018). The great recession and the destruction of minority wealth. *Current History*, 117(802), 298–303. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2018.117.802.298>

³⁴ Smith, H. (2012). *Who stole the American dream?*. Random House Incorporated.

³⁵ Mukunda, G. (2018, September 25). *The social and political costs of the financial crisis, 10 years later*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2018/09/the-social-and-political-costs-of-the-financial-crisis-10-years-later>

³⁶ Hinkley, S. (2019, May 8). *What really caused the great recession?* Institute for Research on Labor and Employment. <https://irle.berkeley.edu/what-really-caused-the-great-recession/>

million jobs were lost in the wake of the crisis and close to “10 million homeowners lost their homes to foreclosure sales between 2006 and 2014.”³⁷

I would argue it’s a sign of the extent of indoctrination in our culture that elites can compare 10-year olds from low-income backgrounds bubbling in some wrong answers on multiple-choice tests to an economic meltdown of that magnitude without it invoking laughter and ridicule across the board. The crisis included “the biggest bank failure in American history—Washington Mutual—eight times larger than any previous bank failure,”³⁸ and the Obama administration wanted to lump schools into this catastrophe?! If this elite ‘logic’ holds in the public mind—cognitively anchored to decades of disinformation about educational reforms—then we might as well equate teachers in high-poverty schools (those transmitting “the soft bigotry of low expectations,”³⁹ as President George W. Bush claimed, a former C-average college student) to mortgage loan officers and brokers ensnaring racial and ethnic minorities into predatory, and often fraudulent, loans designed to fail—to explode like a time bomb. *To explode and destroy lives while the rich reap incredible profits.*

Let’s repeat Secretary Duncan’s comment cited earlier: “We’re not just facing an economic crisis here in America. I’m absolutely convinced we are facing an education crisis as well.” What if there’s truth in Duncan’s words, but not in the way he intended? Putting aside the assumption that standardized test

³⁷ Andres, T. (2019, April 29). *Divided decade: How the financial crisis changed housing*. Marketplace. <https://www.marketplace.org/2018/12/17/what-we-learned-housing/>

³⁸ Smith, H. (2012). *Who stole the American dream?*. Random House Incorporated.

³⁹ Hayes-Greene, D. (2019, August 7). *The soft bigotry of low expectations . . . through mathematics education*. Racial Equity Institute. <https://www.racialequityinstitute.com/blog/2019/8/7/the-soft-bigotry-of-low-expectations-through-mathematics-education>

scores are an adequate measure of a good education (or a child’s potential), what if the concealed truth in Duncan’s statement is that economic crises—or, more specifically, different levels of economic distress within families—do produce what could be called “an education crisis”? What if that’s the deeper truth because a strong relationship exists between family income and standardized test scores? If there were a strong relationship between income and achievement on tests, then we might expect an income-achievement *gradient* where *average* scores go up or down in a predictable fashion depending on the income group studied, such as the lower-, middle-, and upper-classes. So, is that the case?

Let’s reframe Duncan’s message through the lens of one of the educational field’s exemplary critical thinkers. David Berliner, the former president of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and author of several books aiming to teach the public the extent of indoctrination in our culture on educational issues, tells us:

“They [politicians and pundits] all can easily learn that the international tests (e. g. PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS), the national tests (e. g. NAEP), the college entrance tests (e. g. SAT, ACT), and each of the individual state tests follow an identical pattern. It is this: As income increases per family from our poorest families (under the 25th percentile in wealth), to working class (26th-50th percentile in family wealth), to middle class (51st to 75th percentile in family wealth), to wealthy (the highest quartile in family wealth), mean scores go up quite substantially.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Berliner, D. (2017, March 6). *What the numbers really tell us about America’s public schools*. Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/03/06/what-the-numbers-really-tell-us-about-americas-public-schools/>

If one reflects on the tandem rise or fall of income and achievement on tests then it starts to become clear that an anti-egalitarian, activist federal government nurturing the needs of the wealthiest fraction of the population (the top 10 percent? 1 percent? .001 percent?) produces different levels of economic distress for the vast majority. Further, those different levels of economic distress will be reflected in low average test scores for children from the most disadvantaged families, higher average test scores for children from middle-income backgrounds, and still higher average test scores for children from the most advantaged families.

“How do we improve our schools? We begin by recognizing that poverty and affluence are the most important determinants of test scores. This strong correlation shows up in every standardized test.”⁴¹

Diane Ravitch

Perhaps this is partly what Ravitch means by claiming that schools are “in a crisis only so far as society is,”⁴² that the distribution of test scores reflects the distribution of socioeconomic disadvantages (SEDs) within society. To put it another way, if “educational crisis” exists as a cover for *not* scrutinizing the failures of state power to serve the best interests of the vast majority, then problems like poverty (which increases the risk of inadequate prenatal care, family stress, malnutrition, homelessness, child abuse, and a litany of other destabilizing effects) will likely persist from one decade to the next—as long as the deflection of failing schools works on the public mind. Likewise, the same is true as long as the

⁴¹ Ravitch, D. (2020, February 1). *The education reform movement has failed America. We need common sense solutions that Work*. Time. <https://time.com/5775795/education-reform-failed-america/>

⁴² Ravitch, D. (2014). *Reign of error: The hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools* (Illustrated ed.). Vintage.

idea of education as cure-all—no matter what economic agendas are enacted—is relatively unchallenged in the larger culture.

It seems that in education the cure that *needs to be imposed* is first and foremost a type of sedative for the public mind. Perhaps a better framing is to see the “cure” as a parasitic meme reproducing the idea in our collective thinking that schools keep failing and if that weren’t the case then the American Dream would be alive and well for everyone.

Have political elites and mainstream pundits informed the public about the strong relationship between income and achievement? Of course not. That would undermine their narratives of *educational* crisis (and maybe point to a crisis in livable wages and income inequality). In fact, I would argue elites have largely done just the opposite: they’ve trained Americans to think that poor test scores catalyze poor economic outcomes rather than the other way around. They’ve hammered home the idea that teachers are the most important factor affecting student achievement on standardized tests, which isn’t true. In that training, they’ve omitted research on the income-achievement gap and even trivialized the effects of poverty on educational outcomes. This is the topsy-turvy, Orwellian, or Machiavellian world that has been created in our society in terms of thinking—not so intelligently, but rather obediently—about schools, teachers, tests, accountability, poverty, and economic prosperity.

The essays in this collection represent my attempt to grapple with, and make sense of, the upside down world of K-12 public education—as a teacher, graduate student, citizen, and parent to a child getting closer to entering kindergarten’s door.

My second essay, *To Intercede With What’s Happening in the World*, is about scholar-activism. In this essay I’m grappling with the paradox that, on the one hand, academic research and critiques expose the failures of top-down reforms and even the fraudulent, duplicitous nature of elite-driven narratives about “educational crisis,” and yet, at the same time, academia seems untroubled by its own ineffectiveness at communicating these ideas to the wider public. If academic leaders were more concerned with this problem, then wouldn’t they be challenging their own norms and traditions more—of paywalled databases, of articles languishing in obscure journals, the off-putting language of academese, of dissertations destined to collect dust on a single university’s least visited library shelves? I think this is an important issue because academia seems to be guided by the assumption that evidence and the truth (*veritas* in Harvard’s motto) will at some point inform public policies on important societal matters.

But, if the reality is that powerful elites will ignore the critical knowledge produced in academia if these critiques conflict with their own ideological agendas, then that guiding principle is actually, inadvertently, benefitting elite activism in the very areas being critiqued. Why? That’s because if politicians and mainstream outlets ignore these critiques, then the public becomes an easy target for disinformation. Disinformation will parasitize the public mind. Thus, the paradox: scholars can

generate activism within academic communities while, simultaneously, *withdrawing* from a cultural system benefiting activism for the wealthy and powerful.

In the third essay, *The Permanent Way*, I grapple with my own perspective on the perversity, toxicity, and the anti-democratic nature of the educational status quo due to decades of top-down solutions imposed on schools. This leads me to reflect on the ‘stealth dysfunctionalities’ within top-down cultures that undermine *capacity building* inside schools and teachers’ individual development. It also leads me to reflect on the two interrelated issues: 1) the *anti-constructivist* nature of top-down reforms and 2) the influence of the factory model of schooling on the modern era of K-12 reforms.

In the fourth essay, *Anything Less*, I attempt to describe what reforms *haven’t done* in this time period, such as incorporate the ideas of progressive education that’s popular in many affluent, private schools where elites send their own children. This essay does not aim to provide a comprehensive catalogue of what reformers have neglected during the modern school reform era from the 1980s to the present. Instead, it simply highlights what I think of as some of the most crucial blind spots of prescribed reform thinking, including reflecting on insights from Alfie Kohn and Yong Zhao, two innovative critical thinkers in education.

In the fifth essay, *The Shock Doctrine & Paper Sputnik*, I examine the landmark federal report, *A Nation at Risk (ANAR)* from 1983, the catalyst of the modern school reform movement that still shapes reform thinking to this day. One of the arguments I make is that *ANAR* successfully channeled

an inchoate sense in the body politic that something was deeply wrong in our society and turned it into a critique of schools to deflect from anti-egalitarian, pro-corporate government policies. Perhaps the report's lasting power is due to its historical timing as the perfect vehicle for that repositioning of accountability—with schools at the center—first initiated during the Johnson administration. The public's discontent stemmed from the disastrous effects of de-industrialization and plutocratic activism, but our culture's policy blindness allowed that perception to be manipulated.

In the sixth essay, *The School Reform Orthodoxy*, I argue that the narratives about “failing” schools, the crisis rhetoric, the disinformation and propaganda campaigns that elites continually promulgate in the name of reform, should be thought of as the *school reform orthodoxy*. Although it might seem trivial, I think this distinction helps us to reframe the type of media indoctrination that has affected all of us as members of this culture; and that cognitive capture even extends to graduate schools of education. I suspect it has deeply affected our thoughts, unconscious biases, and tacit assumptions about schools, teachers, tests, accountability, poverty, and economic prosperity.

In the seventh essay, *America's Perverse Exceptionalism*, I attempt to flesh out some of the increasing systemic effects of anti-egalitarian economic policies from the past four decades favoring a plutocratic agenda at the expense of the vast majority's well-being. It represents my attempt to develop the type of literacy I think is desperately needed in our culture; one that corrects the policy blindness the mainstream media has cultivated in the body politic. It focuses on what I call America's perverse exceptionalism among our so-called competitor nations. For example, the U.S. does poorly on

international indices on healthcare, infant mortality, income and wealth inequality, social mobility, and child poverty. The school reform orthodoxy trains the public to associate these bleak outcomes with “failing” schools rather than their root causes—a state-corporate complex nourishing the needs of wealth and power in zero sum and negative sum games.

The eight essay, *No Accountability for the Accountabilists*, is devoted to debunking the influential arguments from *ANAR*, which still act like hidden, parasitic memes in our public discourse. It’s not a ‘review of the literature’ or a comprehensive analysis; just my own idiosyncratic response to some of the brilliant, but neglected critiques out there attempting to lift the veil on the school reform orthodoxy. For example, I turn a spotlight on the story about the federal government’s own suppressed report debunking *ANAR*’s crisis narrative—a story I wish all K-12 teachers and graduate students of education were enlightened about.

In the ninth essay, *Never Mind Leadershit*, I grapple with what I see as the two major assumptions behind the school reform orthodoxy: 1) teachers are the most influential factor affecting student achievement on standardized tests and 2) students’ low test scores negatively impact our society’s economic well-being. The first requires us to think about what’s routinely concealed by the school reform orthodoxy—family income, the income-achievement gap, poverty, and any research contradicting elite rhetoric. It also leads me to think about our collective blind spots—culturally ingrained—that make it easy to ignore, for instance, the complex factors affecting child development in our culture and achievement in school. The neglect of those factors in the public discourse is a clue to

the real values behind elite rhetoric. For example, if powerful elites were truly concerned about child development or student achievement above their corporate commitments, then I believe the effects of socioeconomic disadvantages (SEDs) on children would be the topic hammered into our consciousness rather than the endless scapegoating of schools and teachers in low-income communities.

In the tenth essay, *Safe Repository for Elite Deceptions*, I attempt to summarize what I think has been happening in educational reforms in our society, which includes parasitizing the public mind to such an extent that the public often acts as the protector or defender of anti-egalitarian policies and the educational specter.

In the eleventh and final essay, *The Trim Tab & Small Acts*, I outline my own proposal for de-parasitizing the public mind—freeing it from the school reform orthodoxy. Essentially, my solution comes down to a critique of academia’s insularity; an institutional norm that prevents critiques of the status quo and elite manipulations from reaching a wide expanse of the body politic. I argue that as long as that norm remains intact the educational specter will continue to be exploited to the great detriment of our society’s economic health.

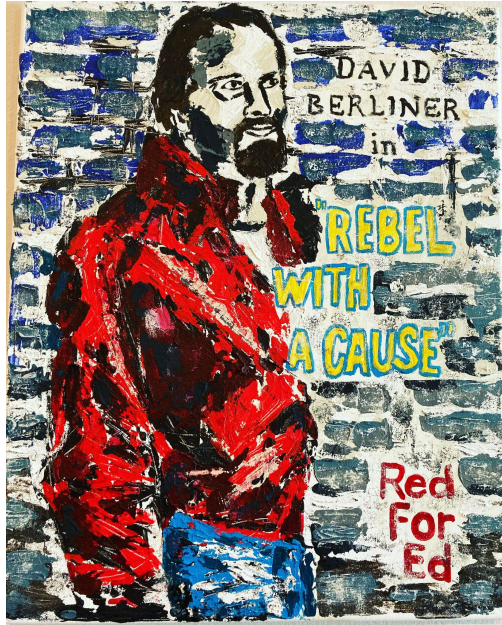
I should mention that when I write the words reformers or elite reformers I actually think that “reformers” is a better label, but I find it a bit tedious to keep using quotation marks to show irony. I also think *deformers* and *reformsters* are fitting terms, but since I indulge quite a bit in metaphorically

reframing what I think is happening in educational reforms (e.g., the “cure” as ideological parasitism), I decided to keep the word play to a minimum in other areas.

Lastly, I’ve been told that the word *elites* is problematic. Who exactly are the elites? Is that the best term for these political and corporate actors? On this topic, I’ll admit I’m simply following in the footsteps of critical thinkers like Paulo Friere. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the most cited book in education (and one of the most cited in the social sciences), Freire uses the term “dominant elites” to refer to those wielding power in our society in order to manipulate, control, dominate, and *domesticate* the masses. After all these decades since its publication in English in 1970 I’m not sure if a term with more specificity is needed. One could explore the ways in which these elites include numerous U.S. Presidents, U.S. Senators and Representatives, Secretaries of Education, mayors and governors, high profile superintendents, and the synergy between them and a long list of corporate actors, such as billionaires like Bill Gates, the Walton Family, the Broads, and Netflix’s Reed Hastings. But, I’m not convinced that such an exploration will produce a better term that resonates with the wider public. However, my own explorations suggest there’s numerous reasons to ‘flip the script’ on the word *parasite* (a term conservatives utilize—the imagery of “takers,” “moochers,” “looters,” the lazy poor) and apply it as the best metaphor to illuminate the nature of elite power in the new century. The prominence of *doublespeak* in our culture makes flipping the script on numerous terms an attractive option.

“Public education is in a crisis only so far as our society is... Without a vision for a better society...
any talk of reform is empty verbiage.”⁴³

Diane Ravitch



Berliner: Rebel with a Conscience, 2021

⁴³ Ravitch, D. (2014). *Reign of error: The boax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools* (Illustrated ed.). Vintage.

Essay 2: To Intercede With What's Happening in the World

"As long as the general population is passive, apathetic, diverted to consumerism or hatred of the vulnerable, then the powerful can do as they please, and those who survive will be left to contemplate the outcome."⁴⁴

Noam Chomsky

"Pick a piece of the problem that you can help solve while trying to see how your piece fits into the broader social change puzzle."⁴⁵

Marian Wright Edelman

"In the US, taxpayers spend \$140 billion every year supporting research, a huge percentage of which they cannot access for free."⁴⁶

Brian Resnick and Julia Belluz

"If we want to re-enchant and empower social science... we must focus on issues of values and power... we must communicate the results of our research to... citizens. If we do this, we may transform social science from what is fast becoming a sterile activity, which is undertaken mostly for its own sake and in increasing isolation from a society which it has little effect and from which it gets little appreciation."⁴⁷

Bent Flyvbjerg

The historian and political activist Howard Zinn is mostly known for his retelling of American history from the perspective of the oppressed—indigenous people, slaves, abolitionists, labor organizers, the

⁴⁴ Chomsky, N. in Morley, C., Ablett, P., & Macfarlane, S. (2019). *Engaging with social work*. Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁵ Edelman, M.W. in Zinn, H. (2015). *A people's history of the United States: 1492-present*. Routledge.

⁴⁶ Resnick, B., & Belluz, J. (2019, July 10). *The open access wars: How to free science from academic paywalls*. Vox.

<https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/6/3/18271538/open-access-elsevier-california-sci-hub-academic-paywalls>

⁴⁷ Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Cambridge University Press.

working poor, immigrant laborers, anarchists, socialists, women—in the bestselling book *A People's History of the United States*. I recently watched a documentary based on Zinn's memoir, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, and his explanation of the title resonated with me. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, the African-American studies professor and political activist, put it this way:

“Zinn, a prolific writer and scholar, tore down the wall intended to separate activism—or partisanship—from the professed objectivity of scholarship. Instead Zinn told his students that he did not ‘pretend to an objectivity that was neither possible nor desirable.’ ‘You can’t be neutral on a moving train,’ I would tell them. ... Events are already moving in certain deadly directions, and to be neutral means to accept that.”⁴⁸

Zinn explains his memoir's title at the beginning of the documentary itself in these words: “I don't think it's possible to be neutral... the world is already moving in certain directions and to be neutral—to be passive—in a situation like that is to collaborate with whatever is going on and I as a teacher do not want to be a collaborator with whatever's happening in the world. I want myself as a teacher and you as students to intercede with whatever's happening in the world.”⁴⁹

It seems we don't hear enough—in academia or in the larger culture—about *interceding* in the world; what it means to do that on an individual basis. Or how do individuals mobilize to create bottom-up

⁴⁸ Taylor, K. (2020, August 24). *You can't be neutral on a moving train: A personal history of our times*. HowardZinn.Org. <https://www.howardzinn.org/bibliography/books/you-cant-be-neutral-on-a-moving-train/>

⁴⁹ Ellis, D., & Mueller, D. (Directors). (2010). *You can't be neutral on a moving train*. [Video file]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwuJjWE-XrA>

movements for social change? Oftentimes academia feels like a space devoted more to individualistic and career-minded *hoop jumping* than one where society's great challenges are debated through the lens of research for the purpose of changing the world for the better.⁵⁰ And it seems so much of our culture outside of school and the workplace is about de-stressing, passive consumption, and spectatorship. There's not enough constructive dialogue about the art of interceding as a literacy like reading or number sense. In our culture, we hear too little about taking actions against injustice, finding points of leverage over systemic problems, learning to raise consciousness on an issue, and mobilizing others in the effort to affect social change.

Isn't this one of the true illiteracies in our culture as opposed to what high-stakes testing in schools supposedly tells us? How different things would be if the art and skill of interceding against injustices in society were prioritized rather than test-taking skills.

In a similar way, I haven't heard much in my experiences at universities about rejecting scholar neutrality; about the apolitical norm being interpreted as an inadvertent form of collaboration with the powerful or what might be called unintended *elite activism*. I find that in many academic spaces, political activism is treated as an obstacle to scientific ideals rather than its moral center. It's a bit strange if this is the case when, by one metric, Thomas Kuhn's 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific*

⁵⁰ Bull, B. (2015, November 23). *On academic hoop jumpers & the fate of education*. Etale. <https://www.etable.org/?p=9567>

Revolutions is the most cited book in the social sciences.⁵¹ I call it strange because I was introduced to Kuhn's influence on academia with descriptions like this one:

“The picture Kuhn paints is not a picture of objective, valid, unchallengeable findings emerging from scientists working with detachment and in a spirit of unalloyed scientific dedication. To the contrary, scientific endeavor, as Kuhn conceives it, is a very human affair. Human interests, human values, human fallibility, human foibles—all play a part.”⁵²

And this one:

“...Kuhn's starting point leads him at once to question the alleged objectivity and value-free neutrality of scientific discovery.”⁵³

One might think that Kuhn's influence might generate more forthright scholar activism along the lines of Zinn's approach. Why not make one's values explicit to a greater degree and a guiding light as one engages in scholarship that's never value-free?

⁵¹ Green, E. (2016, May 16). *What are the most-cited publications in the social sciences (according to Google scholar)?* LSE Impact Blog. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/05/12/what-are-the-most-cited-publications-in-the-social-sciences-according-to-google-scholar/>

⁵² Crotty, M., & Crotty, M. F. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Sage.

⁵³ Ibid.

From this perspective, what do universities truly value if you scratch beneath the surface of mottos and mission statements? As a graduate student, I've often been frustrated that conventional academic writing is so highly prized in universities as opposed to less formal styles, genres, mediums (e.g., talks, books, videos, blogs, digital art, street art, graphic novels, comics, documentaries, poetry) that resonate more with wider audiences. Even worse, universities pressure scholars to publish in so-called 'high-impact' (i.e., prestigious) journals which have a long tradition of being inaccessible to the public. Where's the *impact* in that?

It led me to ask in one of my doctoral courses: Is academia preparing us for careers where it's acceptable to strive hard to publish articles in paywalled journals that few scholars even read let alone people outside academia? Similarly, how telling is it that most theses and dissertations are destined to collect dust on a single university's least visited library shelves? I can't help but wonder if there is a *hidden curriculum* embedded in these norms—like teaching one to aim for academic insularity or forgetting the Common Good; the opposite mentality needed for actions that intercede against oppressive realities.

Personally, I think it's outrageous that most academic research is locked behind prohibitive paywalls. Who's going to pay \$30 to \$40 to view a single scholarly article? How is that even the market price, especially for a genre so often ridiculed as jargon-laden, dry, and opaque?⁵⁴ I'll never forget seeing friends in my cohort downloading a torrent of academic articles during our last few days as enrolled

⁵⁴ Clayton, V. (2015, October 27). *The Ig Nobel prize and other efforts to eradicate complex academic writing*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/complex-academic-writing/412255/>

students at Harvard's Graduate School of Education knowing that we'd soon be locked out of those databases (despite having paid an astronomical tuition). The day after graduation our student IDs no longer granted us access even to walk inside Harvard's 70 libraries as well. What does that say about higher education? It made me think: Are universities that committed to *commodifying* knowledge? And why seal it off from debt-ridden alumni? Why seal off the 'advance of knowledge' to paying customers only? Do universities see themselves as generally detached from the needs of the wider public and former students alike? Shouldn't academia's real goal be just the opposite—tenaciously widening access to knowledge in order to impact the world? It makes one question the dubious use of words like 'impact' in universities. It makes one wonder about the myriad ways in which anti-intellectualism is systemically reinforced in our society, even by institutions supposedly devoted to education.

Zinn's idea about interceding in the world and rejecting the pretense of neutrality towards what's happening in society reminds me of Paulo Freire, one of the best known thinkers in the field of education—my own niche. In Freire's most famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he often speaks about *intervening* in the world or the institutional norms that obstruct that process, like in the following excerpt:

“The more students work at storing the deposits [lessons] entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed, 30th anniversary edition*. Continuum.

Freire has also said: “The educator has the duty of not being neutral.”⁵⁶ It seems to me that the meaning of ‘not being neutral’ is rarely discussed in graduate schools of education or staff meetings in public schools. As a student at four different graduate schools of education, I can’t recall a discussion focused on this topic. As a teacher of 18 years at four different elementary schools I’ve never heard the topic brought up at a staff meeting. Isn’t that surprising when Friere has the most cited book in the field of education?⁵⁷ Isn’t it important to understand why *neutrality* isn’t possible or desirable for scholars? Isn’t it important to understand why neutrality might be undesirable for teachers in an educational landscape dominated by prescriptions?

Do universities value a certain type of critical intervention, which is “intervening” in the world through ‘high-impact’ articles that few people read, especially outside of academia? Is that what norms demonstrate? Is that part of the hidden curriculum? Some of these articles are critiques of existing conditions in society, but if their reach is severely limited, then what’s the point? In a Derridean spirit, we might playfully call them *non-intervening interventions*. I wonder if the hidden point is that this is the acceptable form of dissent and critique in our society—actions that have no real chance of affecting the directions that have already been mapped out by powerful elites. But these critiques exist; they’re out there (in the literature; in paywalled databases); demonstrating that dissent *is* articulated, tolerated

⁵⁶ Horton, M., & Freire, P. (1990). *We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change*. Temple University Press.

⁵⁷ Green, E. (2016, May 16). *What are the most-cited publications in the social sciences (according to Google scholar)?* LSE Impact Blog. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/05/12/what-are-the-most-cited-publications-in-the-social-sciences-according-to-google-scholar/>

as one assumes in a vibrant democratic society. *But doesn't it matter if they're read or not?* If they strive for *public* impact? If they raise consciousness against injustice and oppression in our society?

Heterodox = “contrary to or different from an acknowledged standard, a traditional form, or an established religion;”⁵⁸ “[not] conforming with accepted or orthodox standards or beliefs.”⁵⁹

If that's the case, then I think the situation offers a clue to *unacceptable* forms of critique: messages challenging existing conditions in a way that might resonate with wider audiences; the danger in that being those messages have the potential to actually *move* the body politic in a new direction. Isn't that what makes thinkers like Zinn and Freire threatening to the status quo? Their ideas have resonated in the imagination of millions of people in various languages across the globe. The problem is this type of heterodox resonance doesn't happen often enough in our society due in part to institutional norms. It isn't articulated enough in a larger media culture saturated in elite-friendly narratives. These two thinkers are intellectual anomalies in that sense—scholar-activists who moved a significant number of people to think differently about oppressive conditions and the abuse of power.

In the words of Noam Chomsky, the world-renowned public intellectual and dissident, these thinkers were speaking truth *not* to power (“truths that [the powerful] already know well enough”⁶⁰), but to the multi-faced oppressed, the victims, the powerless, the precariats, the subsistence workers, members of

⁵⁸ Merriam Webster. (n.d.). *heterodox*. The Merriam-Webster.Com Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heterodox>

⁵⁹ Oxford University Press (OUP). (n.d.). *Heterodox*. Lexico.Com. <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/heterodox>

⁶⁰ Chomsky, N. (2015). *Powers and prospects: Reflections on nature and the social order* (Second ed.). Haymarket Books.

the vast majority, the potential allies out there, and to “an audience that matters,” (and not just *to* but with “a community of common concern”).⁶¹

Perhaps some of the greatest threats to the directions already mapped out for the world by elite consensus are critiques with the potential power to move *thought* in the body politic; that is, a critical threshold is reached in the collective thinking of the population which governing elites cannot ignore without problematic consequences. *A threshold is reached which starts to translate into the mobilized pressure of public demands on government and perhaps businesses as well.*

“Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.”⁶²

Frederick Douglass

“Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can quietly become a power that no government can suppress, a power that can transform the world.”⁶³

Howard Zinn

I think Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* makes it clear that bottom-up social movements are the body politic’s most effective form of democratic leverage over the reluctance of political elites to

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Douglass, F. (2019, August 8). (1857) Frederick Douglass, “if there is no struggle, there is no progress.” Black Past. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress/>

⁶³ Zinn, H. (2007). *A power governments cannot suppress*. Macmillan Publishers.

deviate from representing the donor class—the ones Chomsky calls their “real constituency.”⁶⁴ That’s especially true when deviating means undermining that constituency’s plutocratic agendas.



Tribute to Zinn, 2021

⁶⁴ Chomsky, N., & Polychroniou, C. J. (2018, November 23). *Noam Chomsky: Moral depravity defines US politics*. Global Policy. <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/23/11/2018/noam-chomsky-moral-depravity-defines-us-politics>

Essay 3: ‘The Permanent Way’

“Thinking that the light at the end of the education tunnel is a standards freight train coming our way. Gonna hurt bad.”⁶⁵

Gerald Bracey

“...[teachers should] struggle against unthinking submergence in the social reality that prevails...”⁶⁶

Maxine Greene

“One of the basic elements of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is *prescription*. Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber’s consciousness.”⁶⁷

Paulo Freire

“We live in a permanent environment of educational reform and educational failure. The reforms focus on fixing things within the schoolhouse, but the fundamental problem that needs fixing lies outside in the broader society.”⁶⁸

Jack & Amy Rothman

“The modern state, among other things, is an engine of propaganda, alternately manufacturing crises and claiming to be the only instrument which can effectively deal with them.”⁶⁹

Christopher Lasch

⁶⁵ Bracey, G.W. [@gbracey123]. (2009, July 5). *Thinking that the light at the end of the education tunnel is a standards freight train coming our way. Gonna hurt bad.* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/gbracey123/status/2488976315>

⁶⁶ Greene, M. (1973). *Teacher as stranger: Educational philosophy for the modern age*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

⁶⁷ Freire, P. (2007). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 30th anniversary*. (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1970).

⁶⁸ Rothman, J. & Rothman, A. (2014, March 17). *Why educational reform fails*. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-educational-reform-fails_b_4597549

⁶⁹ Lasch, C. (1968). *Christopher Lasch on the cultural cold war*. Joel Whitney. <https://www.joelwhitney.net/christopherlasch.html>

“History, [Zinn] said, is like a moving train. You can’t ride the train and then say you have no idea how you arrived at your destination. You’re either on board or not — you can’t be neutral.”⁷⁰

Steven Biel

I think Zinn’s metaphor of a moving train on long established tracks (railroads are also called ‘the permanent way’) applies well to what’s been happening for a long time in K-12 education. Powerful elites—in the federal government, state governments, and the corporate world—have set a troubling course for education for decades on end with zero accountability for harmful to disastrous policy prescriptions.

Since I started teaching in the late 1990s, the drivers of educational reforms have been standardization, high-stakes testing, test-based accountability, the looming threat of sanctions, value-added teacher evaluations, increased privatization, ranking schools and teachers based on tests, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and threatening to penalize schools if a small percentage of their students opt-out of state testing. What do these norms have in common? Perhaps the most important commonality is that they all, in their own way, train us to accept high test scores in a few subjects as a legitimate measure of a good education. They synergistically reinforce that notion, that bias deep into our thinking. In fact, I would argue that bias has *parasitized* our unconscious thinking without us realizing it.

⁷⁰ Biel, S. (2012, December 23). “*You can’t be neutral on a moving train.*” HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/you-cant-be-neutral-on-a-_b_2007264

Those drivers represent the educational world I've known for the last two decades. They tend to be top-down, punitive, bureaucratic, market-based, and disempowering to teachers—perfect ways for curtailing creativity and innovative thinking in schools.

“Nothing is more disheartening than the conviction that there exists no alternative to a system in permanent crisis which is crushing our souls and flattening our spirits.”⁷¹

Yanis Varoufakis

The public might be aware of some of the dysfunctionalities linked to this type of system. For example, *teaching to the test*—that criticism seems to have filtered out into our popular culture. (Is that because everyone knows that *cramming* for an exam is not real learning?). But does the public know if that practice persists post-NCLB in less obvious ways? Do people understand that teaching to the test is often the same as *teaching to the principal* (there's a term most people have no experience with)? Principals are often pressured to raise test scores by superintendents, which in turn translates into pressure on teachers to adopt principal-directed strategies aimed at boosting scores. Thus, teaching to the test—which has a stigma attached to it and deservedly so—can continue in less explicit ways in the post-NCLB landscape if high test scores remain leadership's top priority.

⁷¹ Varoufakis, Y. (2020, October 12). *Another now: An intimate introduction*. Transcend Media Service. <https://www.transcend.org/tms/2020/10/another-now-an-intimate-introduction/>

That priority—felt most in schools in low-income communities constantly racing to catch up with the test scores in middle- and upper-income ones—creates low-trust work environments for teachers.

Trust—that’s another topic the public isn’t warned about and it’s not one with much traction in our culture. In essence, worker distrust is another byproduct of top-down cultures sacrificing individualized forms of growth on the altar of standardization. For example, you see worker distrust in schools where lesson plans have to be submitted to administrators. (During the pandemic, teachers in California were mandated to send weekly lesson plans to unknown state officials.) You see it where schools regularly evaluate teachers, but never ask teachers to evaluate the quality of support from their administrators or district leadership. Top-down cultures promote hierarchical, uni-directional accountability and most people accept it rather than question whether it’s a contradiction to champion accountability if it only goes in one direction—down the chain of command.

In these low-trust environments it’s very common to see school administrators turning to paid consultants or anyone outside the school to improve ‘outcomes’ rather than building capacity from within schools by tapping into a staff’s existing strengths and diverse aspirations. These consultants are often part of district-wide strategies. The *de-individualizing* bias produced by standardization leads people to think that what’s good for one school is good for another.

It also fits with the notion that schools need to be ‘fixed’. In a stealth fashion, that metaphor frames schools as something equivalent to *machines* needing to be repaired (i.e., bad parts, bad teachers).

There’s a world of difference between that metaphor, that conceptual frame and instead thinking of

schools as *gardens*, for instance, which brings to mind the need for nurturance, cultivation, a place of unique beauty and diverse needs. *Are we cultivating sameness or difference?*

District-led initiatives are not always disempowering to teachers, but even good ideas can be warped in disempowering contexts. For example, top-down cultures and low-trust environments can distort the real purpose of what's called professional learning communities (PFCs), a more than 10-year educational trend with the potential to flatten out hierarchical thinking in schools if pursued correctly. PFCs ought to catalyze democratic behaviors in schools (as John Dewey long ago advocated) in the wake of NCLB's autocratism. However, that potential is often squandered—at least in my experience at various schools—since PFCs often don't escape from principal-directed objectives, which are tied to leadership's testing priority.

What's the importance of high-trust environments? In the *Harvard Business Review*, Paul Zak, a neuroeconomist, wrote: “In my research I've found that building a culture of trust is what makes a meaningful difference. Employees in high-trust organizations are more productive, have more energy at work, collaborate better with their colleagues, and stay with their employers longer than people working at low-trust companies. They also suffer less chronic stress and are happier with their lives, and these factors fuel stronger performance.”⁷²

⁷² Zak, P. J. (2019, November 27). *The neuroscience of trust*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2017/01/the-neuroscience-of-trust>

Cultures of trust seem to be one of those easily neglected factors that produce a wide range of positive systemic ripple effects in work environments.

If high numbers of teachers in America's public schools work in low-trust environments, then wouldn't it be ironic that elite reformers are fixated on holding individual teachers accountable for improving their 'performance' when they've created a system that undermines it? That hypocrisy teaches us the importance of looking at the situational complexity inside schools (and unmasking the political rhetoric about them). Rather than fixating on test scores, one could ask what's the level of trust inside schools? It leads me to wonder if those highly respected teachers in Finland were mandated to turn in weekly 'engagement logs', lesson plans, and a second attendance record to *state auditors* during distance learning in 2020-2021 like teachers in California.

“We do not ‘have’ mental models. We ‘are’ our mental models.”⁷³

Peter Senge

“People don't resist change. They resist being changed.”⁷⁴

Peter Senge

“The current political climate in education in the United States, which emphasizes standardization and testing at the expense of teacher autonomy, initiative, and creativity, is also at odds with the basic principles of constructivism.”⁷⁵

Mordechai Gordon

⁷³ Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Currency.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Gordon, M. (2009). Toward a pragmatic discourse of constructivism: Reflections on lessons from practice. *Educational studies*, 45(1), 39-58.

In any case, these are some of the norms generated by reform policies such as high-stakes state testing programs, NCLB, Race to the Top, the Common Core, and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA); essentially one top-down, anti-democratic solution after another for everyone *at the bottom* of the hierarchy to adapt to as best they can in the K-12 educational system.

Alongside critiquing reforms as anti-democratic I might also add a far less discussed problem—they're *anti-constructivist*. That term might be meaningless to the public (perhaps even to some teachers), but it's an important issue. I think the democratic spirit and the philosophy of constructivism go hand in hand. Like any philosophy, there are “many faces”⁷⁶ to *constructivism*, but I have only its simplest definition in mind; the belief that “knowledge about the world does not simply exist out there, waiting to be discovered [in immutable forms], but is rather constructed by human beings in their interaction with the world.”⁷⁷ That interaction with texts, the curriculum, the media—between people making sense of reality in different ways—builds our mental models about the world around us. Peter Senge, the systems thinker, refers to mental models as assumptions, biases, images, stories, “simple generalizations,” “pictures of the world,” implicit inferences, and, in one of my favorite explanations, as “subtle patterns of reasoning which underlay our behavior.”⁷⁸ Perhaps the most paradoxical aspect of this concept is reflected in Senge's statement that “We do not ‘have’ mental models. We ‘are’ our mental models. They are the medium through which we and the world interact. They are inextricably

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Currency.

interwoven into our personal life history and sense of who we are.”⁷⁹ Thus, our mental models are always shaped by our non-academic experiences as well—perhaps overwhelmingly so. They are so integrated into “who we are” we could say they are our *thoughts* and *eyes*—our unconscious reasoning. Constructivism happens to emphasize the element of *human agency* in this interactive process of building mental models about the world.

By critiquing ‘the permanent way’ as anti-constructivist I mean to point out that these top-down reforms tend to emphasize the traditional view of knowledge. It’s a view stressing the opposite of individual agency—conformity, deference to authority—in the same process of building our mental models about the world. In schools, that view often leads to emphasizing rote memorization, passive learning (students as ‘empty vessels’), teachers as *delivery systems*, standardization, strict regimentation, an exam-oriented education: all the underlying perversities in school cultures NCLB laid bare on a grand scale.

“Finding little resistance from educators, corporate reformers have replaced the language of growth, development, creativity, ingenuity, and responsibility with words straight from the factory floor: performance, accountability, standardization.”⁸⁰

Susan Ohanian & Philip Kovacs

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ohanian, S., & Kovacs, P. (2007). Make room at the table for teachers. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 89(4), 270-272.

In this context, one thinks of the *factory model* of schooling. Historically, that model is tied to Frederick W. Taylor’s popular theory of scientific management for actual factories—assembly-line labor—but which was also explicitly applied to schools in the first decades of the 20th century. In industries, the Taylorist dream was partly “to make workers *interchangeable*, able to do the simple tasks that the new division of labor required—like standard parts divested of individuality and humanity.”⁸¹ These workers needed to become faceless robots working on standardized products (a norm that has generated unexamined mental models in our society).

Although it’s rarely discussed, I suspect Taylorism continues to shape our mental models about schooling. For example, one sees it in the ubiquity of bell schedules, age-based classrooms, orderly rows of desks, and students being told to walk in straight lines (with their hands behind their backs at my school). I once had a principal who instructed students to keep both palms flat on their desks when done with state testing in hopes that they would grow bored holding that position and instead reopen their testing booklets to *recheck* their answers. These mental models in the collective unconscious (to repurpose Jung’s psychoanalytic term)—when activated by reforms like NCLB and Race to the Top or autocratic leaders—can steer schools into an ever-widening array of unhealthy, anti-democratic, and de-individualizing behaviors.

⁸¹ Zinn, H. (2015). *A people’s history of the United States: 1492-present*. Routledge.

“The more completely [a teacher] fills the receptacles, the better [the teacher]. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are.”⁸²

Paulo Friere

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”⁸³

William Butler Yeats

If one goes back in time one might see more explicit language infused with Taylorism. For example, Ellwood P. Cubberley, “a pioneer in the field of educational administration”⁸⁴ and dean of Stanford University’s school of education from 1917 to 1933, used factory-inspired dehumanizing language about children. He wrote, “Our schools are, in a sense, factories, in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of twentieth century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down.”⁸⁵ In this industrial-age thinking, teachers are the de-individualized assembly-line workers and the students are the dehumanized products of mechanization. Everyone’s a cog in the machine.

⁸² Freire, P. (2007). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 30th anniversary*. (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1970).

⁸³ Waldrep, L. W. (2014). *Becoming an architect*. John Wiley & Sons.

⁸⁴ Wikipedia contributors. (2020, December 17). *Ellwood Patterson Cubberley*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ellwood_Patterson_Cubberley

⁸⁵ Kincheloe, J. L., Kincheloe, J. L., & Weil, D. K. (Eds.). (2001). *Standards and schooling in the United States: An encyclopedia* (Vol. 1). ABC-CLIO.

It's hard not to notice that Cubberley's top-down, anti-democratic thinking about schools employed manufacturing metaphors (e.g., *building pupils, children as products*) while constructivism uses similar language, but to think about building knowledge between active human subjects.

Just as I think it's misguided to think that NCLB isn't still haunting educational practices today, I believe it's misguided to think that the mental models of Taylorism aren't still influencing what is going on in schools.

Taylor's book, *The Principles of Scientific Management* was “the best-selling business book of the first half of the twentieth century”⁸⁶ and, in the 1970s, economic historians voted Taylor the most influential thinker in business history.⁸⁷ Thus, Taylorism has strong roots in our culture; it informs the mental models *interwoven* into our unconscious thinking about business and schooling. I think of ‘the permanent way’ of K-12 reforms as the latest resurrection of Tayloristic values—too often divesting students and teachers of their individuality and creativity. It's fascinating how Tayloristic mental models permeate our collective unconscious in a society that wants to see itself as “the land of the free and the home of the brave.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Lepore, J. (2017, June 19). *Not so fast*. The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/10/12/not-so-fast>

⁸⁷ Quartz, S. R., & Sejnowski, T. J. (2010). *Liars, lovers, and heroes: What the new brain science reveals about how we become who we are*. Harper Collins.

⁸⁸ Wikipedia contributors. (2021g, April 25). *The star-spangled banner*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Star-Spangled_Banner

Freire famously criticized the traditional approach to schooling, calling it the banking model of education; knowledge *deposited* into students as “passive entities,” receptacles, spectators, “docile listeners.”⁸⁹ Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* teaches us that the banking method is the best approach for producing “docile pawns,”⁹⁰ “automatons,”⁹¹ and “adaptable, manageable beings.”⁹² *Always adapting, never interceding*. Those dispositions are not celebrated as 21st century skills (or in the U.S. national anthem), but perhaps they are valued by powerful elites far more than they would ever admit in public discourse.

Curiously, Taylor and his college men often appeared to float free from the kind of accountability that they demanded from everybody else. Others might have been asked, for example: Did Bethlehem’s profits [a steel factory, one of Taylor’s clients] increase as a result of their work? Taylor, however, rarely addressed the question head-on. With good reason. Bethlehem fired him in 1901 and threw out his various systems. Yet this evident vacuum of concrete results did not stop Taylor from repeating his parables as he preached the doctrine of efficiency to countless audiences across the country.⁹³

Matthew Stewart

The top-down solutions of ‘the permanent way’ are associated with a variety of perverse outcomes, including narrowing the curriculum, normalizing ‘test-prep pedagogy’, eroding student motivation, deprofessionalizing and deskilling teachers, increasing autocratic school leadership (rather than the

⁸⁹ Freire, P. (2007). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 30th anniversary*. (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1970).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Stewart, M. (2017, March 22). *The management myth*. The Atlantic.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/06/the-management-myth/304883/>

positive forms of leadership championed in leadership studies programs in academia), and protecting standardized tests from bottom-up dissent (due to ESSA the state of New York, for instance, planned to label “schools with low test-taking rates ... [as] ‘nonproficient’”⁹⁴). ESSA teaches us about the squelching of collective intercessions.

The problems these top-down solutions generate within schools are consistently ignored by those holding schools accountable for higher test scores. In other words, elite reformers never acknowledge that the “cures” they impose could ever be worse than the disease (or the disease itself). There’s no awareness that the *situational complexity* inside schools can be negatively affected by reform solutions (at times profoundly so), which in turn stifles the individual and collective capacities of teachers. It’s assumed the invisible hand of elite reformers could only generate positive effects because we’re taught that *schools* are the problem, not imposed reforms or anti-egalitarian economic agendas.

Worst of all, these and other perverse outcomes have been more pronounced in schools with higher concentrations of disadvantaged students simply because the lowest *average* test scores always exist in those schools (as noted in the first essay). Because of the reliability of the income-achievement gap and the pressures of test-based accountability, the negative impacts of top-down reforms are most acute for disadvantaged students and their teachers. How often do you hear political elites admit that adverse educational reforms routinely hit disadvantaged students the hardest? Reformers want the public to

⁹⁴ Guisbond, L. (2018, June 8). *The bottom line on opting out of high-stakes standardized tests*. Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2018/06/08/the-bottom-line-on-opting-out-of-high-stakes-standardized-tests/>

believe disadvantaged students are being helped *the most* by their policies. Orwellian tends to be the rule in K-12 reforms.

There's also a more elusive, insidious aspect to these reform-related perversities. The ESSA, for example, has been praised for reining in the federal government's role in shaping K-12 reform policies. *The federal government reining in itself?* This is after 14 years of NCLB's toxic culture of rigid compliance with top-down mandates and an impossible 100 percent proficiency requirement for all schools in 12 years (which, for instance, would have designated 99 percent of schools in California as *failing*).⁹⁵

“Although NCLB represented a massive wrong turn in federal education policy, ESSA is more like a change in drivers than a U-turn.”⁹⁶

Stan Karp

Here's a typical reaction to ESSA's shifting of power to state and local levels: “[ESSA] returns decision-making for our nation's education back to where it belongs—in the hands of local educators, families, and communities.”⁹⁷ *In the hands of educators and families?* That's blindness to reality. It's mainly back in the hands of state and district authorities. Now, putting aside the absurdity of not holding politicians accountable for what happened to schools in those 14 years, what is rarely discussed

⁹⁵ Bracey, G. W. (2009). *Education bell: Rhetoric vs. reality* (1st Edition). Editorial Projects in Education.

⁹⁶ Karp, S. (2020, June 5). *ESSA: NCLB repackaged*. Rethinking Schools. <https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/essa-nclb-repackaged/>

⁹⁷ National Education Association. (2021). *Every student succeeds act: NEA*. NEA. <https://www.nea.org/student-success/smart-just-policies/essa>

is what happens, on a systemic level, when years of *federal* micromanagement is translated into *state* micromanagement and from there into *district* and *school-level* micromanagement. If the most cited book in education, Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, were taken more seriously as a guiding light, then more people might have realized that educators have been psychologically trained to “accept the passive role imposed on them” for years, and that training has taught them to “adapt” and conform rather than to question authority.⁹⁸

Inspired by Freire’s insights, one could say that the federal government—with the dutiful help of state, district, and local authorities—has transformed the thinking of educators to the point where the main prescribers of reforms can now confidently withdraw from the ‘center stage’ as it were, speak of decentralization and flexibility, and remove themselves from any association with NCLB’s “toxic brand.”⁹⁹ What are the chances that state, district, and local authorities will deviate in any significant way from the top-down thinking they’ve been immersed in all these years? The truth is Taylorism permeates our mental models—our unconscious thinking—about schooling. It doesn’t require much to activate them.

I’ve taught at two different elementary schools since ESSA and know from firsthand experience how that spirit of top-down accountability—NCLB’s toxic culture—can easily persist at local and site-levels (not to mention at the state level) in the absence of the worst national policies. It’s naïve to assume that

⁹⁸ Freire, P. (2007). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 30th anniversary*. (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1970).

⁹⁹ Spellings, M. (2010, March 17). *Spellings: “no child left behind” is a “toxic brand.”* National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124758597>

a change in legislation will undo the fundamental, anti-democratic nature of ‘the permanent way’.

Freire’s philosophical warnings were prescient in this regard; pointing to our *consciousness* as the target of “domestication,” training, indoctrination. While the metaphor of *domestication* is brilliant, I would argue that it’s better to see such training as a covert process that *parasitizes* our unconscious thinking. By parasitism, I mean to say that elite teachings turn us into perfect hosts—willing to acquiesce to, or unthinkingly defend, elite agendas, even if they undermine our own interests.

The philosopher John Dewey, another one of the most cited authors in education, wondered if teachers could “*ever* receive ‘obligatory prescriptions’... and not become hopelessly *servile* in [their] attitude”¹⁰⁰ [my italics]. What happens when adapting to prescriptions is the norm for years or decades throughout our educational system? I would call that unacknowledged *in-capacity building* (to play off of the popular term). Put differently, I imagine that any form of training might build capacity in the teaching workforce, but within a prescribed spectrum deemed acceptable by elite power; and yet, at the same time, it builds in-capacity because so much of that training is severed from one’s own inclinations, individuality, aspirations, and creativity. That’s its anti-democratic and anti-constructivist bent.

“Can the teacher ever receive ‘obligatory prescriptions’? Can he receive from another a statement of the means by which he is to reach his ends, and not become hopelessly servile in his attitude?”¹⁰¹

John Dewey

¹⁰⁰ Dewey, J. (2019). *The collected works of John Dewey*. 40 titles in one volume. E-artnow ebook.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Perhaps the difference is more visible in a distinction made by Senge in his most influential book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. This is the book that kick started thinking about PFCs in the 1990s. In *Fifth Discipline*, Senge compares two different types of organizations: ones that are traditional (i.e., authoritarian, top-down driven, compliance-oriented) and ones that are fueled by collective learning (i.e., democratic, synergistic). Senge describes the latter as organizations that build capacity by creating a space “where it is safe for people to create visions, where inquiry and commitment to the truth are the norm, and where challenging the status quo is expected—especially when the status quo includes obscuring aspects of current reality that people seek to avoid.”¹⁰² I believe this kind of collective space for pluralistic visions, inquiry into the truth about reforms, and challenges to elite-driven norms is exactly the type of culture ‘the permanent way’ has *suppressed* for decades; and yet it does allow—and even rewards—intelligent adaptations and development within prescribed parameters. Furthermore, it obscures our perception of what’s best for children in terms of their futures and the broader goals of education.

Senge has said that, “There are only two mindsets that can infiltrate an organization: control or learning... and its question of which one is dominant.”¹⁰³ How upside-down is it that ‘the permanent way’ of K-12 reforms has emphasized a mindset of control rather than learning in a system that’s supposed to be *devoted to learning*?

¹⁰² Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Currency.

¹⁰³ Senge, P. (2015, June 4). *How do you define a learning organization?* By Peter Senge, author of the fifth discipline. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vc2ruCErTok>

It's easy to disregard the toxicity of an organizational culture when one's not in it. I think that's even true for teachers who are no longer immersed in the most insidious forms of top-down perversity from the NCLB era. Here's a potent reminder of just how Kafkaesque the *logic* of prescriptions became during this period. Could the reality on the ground have reached a more warped instrumentalism than in 2013 when Michael, a 9-year old African-American boy, who is blind, unable to speak, and "was born with a brain stem but not a complete brain,"¹⁰⁴ was forced to take Florida's alternate high-stakes standardized assessment in language arts, mathematics, and science? His teacher had to "move [Michael's] hand [toward] one of three boxes and then... make the determination" if Michael seemed to be signaling a choice or not.¹⁰⁵ Since Michael's blind, state officials provided the teacher with a Braille version of the standardized test even though Michael doesn't understand Braille.¹⁰⁶ *And elite reformers want people to believe that their prescriptions are designed to help the most disadvantaged?!*

Michael's test score, a zero, presumably affected his teacher's performance evaluation, which, in Florida, was linked to a value-added measurement (VAM)—the complex algorithm the Obama administration championed to estimate the *value* teachers *add* to student growth.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Strauss, V. (2013, May 6). *They made him take the test*. Washington Post.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2013/05/06/they-made-him-take-the-test/?utm_term=.59d156b4d201

¹⁰⁵ Klein, R. (2017, December 7). *Boy does not have complete brain, still has to take standardized tests*. HuffPost.

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/michael-brain-standardized-tests_n_4790226

¹⁰⁶ Strauss, V. (2013, May 6). *They made him take the test*. Washington Post.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2013/05/06/they-made-him-take-the-test/?utm_term=.59d156b4d201https://www.huffpost.com/entry/michael-brain-standardized-tests_n_4790226

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Does it surprise anyone that elites would apply an *economic* concept like value-added to teachers and child development?

It almost makes Orwellian sense because value-added is the last type of evaluation elites would want applied to their own *economic* agendas. Can you imagine mainstream news outlets dissecting the real economic and social value—beyond all the rhetoric—that specific elite agendas add to, or more likely detract from, the lives of the vast majority in our society? The bottom 80 percent? The middle class? The working poor? Can you imagine news outlets comparing those effects to the value added to the multi-billion dollar corporations that state power tend to favor? To the richest 1 percent? The richest .001 percent? And finally comparing U.S. economic policies to more egalitarian agendas in other rich industrialized nations?

That type of knowledge is marginalized to the point of *illiteracy* in our body politic. My argument is that ‘the permanent way’ helps to keep dangerous knowledge marginalized in our culture. It keeps the body politic from collectively *learning* what is happening to its well-being, its economic interests in our society due to plutocratic activism.

Essay 4: Anything Less...

“It is not only what we do, but also what we do not do, for which we are accountable.”¹⁰⁸

Moliere

“I think we should not educate children to be similar according to a standardized metric but help them to discover their own talents and teach them to be different from one another. Diversity is richness in humanity and a condition for innovation.”¹⁰⁹

Pasi Sahlberg

“All OECD nations—except the U.S., Israel, and Turkey—devote as much funding or more to schools facing the biggest socioeconomic challenges as they do to schools with more privileged students.”¹¹⁰

Arne Duncan

What about what these top-down reforms didn't do? And not just since I've been teaching, but in the past four decades—the period I refer to as the modern era of educational reforms. This is a period in which elites have castigated schools from the 1980s to the present as “failing,” “broken,” “mediocre,” and “inferior” (to our so-called international competitors), and yet the solutions imposed to ‘fix’ them are never held to account for failing to end the perceived crisis that justified their imposition in the first place. This cycle has been repeating for decades. In fact, this pattern is similar to the scapegoating of schools that's been prevalent for more than 100 years.

¹⁰⁸ *Accountability*. (n.d.). Mahatma Gandhi Canadian Foundation for World Peace. Retrieved from <http://www.gandhifoundation.ca/day-42---march-12th---accountability.html>

¹⁰⁹ Sahlberg, P. (2012, June 29). How germ is infecting schools around the world. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/how-germ-is-infecting-schools-around-the-world/2012/06/29/gJQAVELZAW_blog.html

¹¹⁰ Duncan, A. (2010, December 7). *Secretary Arne Duncan's remarks at OECD's release of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 results*. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/secretary-arne-duncans-remarks-oecd-release-program-international-student-assessment->

So, what has ‘the permanent way’ not done? For starters, what these reforms didn’t do is address the fact that “[schools] in impoverished neighborhoods tend to have higher class sizes, spend less per pupil, have teachers earning lower salaries, are not as well equipped as schools in wealthier areas and enroll students who are exposed to various social and economic issues.”¹¹¹ As Daniel A. Domenech, the former director of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), asked: “How can we possibly believe that a child receiving an education in a system that is spending only a third of what a neighboring [wealthier] district is spending will be getting the same quality of education?”¹¹²

Oftentimes, elite reformers want the public to believe that money makes no difference in terms of student achievement while sending their children to schools with much greater resources.

Domenech also points out that “[when] we criticize the performance of our students relative to the performance of students from other developed nations, we fail to note that in most of those nations the per pupil funding is the same across the nation or at least across their states.”¹¹³ In fact, Robert Slavin, an education scholar, tells us: “To my knowledge, the U.S. is the only nation to fund elementary and secondary education based on local wealth [on average 45 percent of funding comes from local taxes]. Other developed countries either equalize funding or provide extra funding for individuals or

¹¹¹ Domenech, D. A. (2016, May). Our country’s confounding chasm. *School Administrator*, 73 (5). Retrieved from://home/chronos/u-36cd2dc5e3f065a456a4b38080782ca5e7063adf/MyFiles/Downloads/Our_countrys_confounding_chasm.pdf

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

groups felt to need it. In the Netherlands, for example, national funding is provided to all schools based on the number of pupils enrolled, but for every guider allocated to a middle-class Dutch child, 1.25 guilders are allocated for a lower-class child and 1.9 guilders for a minority child, exactly the opposite of the situation in the U.S., where lower-class and minority children typically receive less than middle-class white children.”¹¹⁴

It appears this funding inequity has been the norm in most states during the modern era of educational reforms. During this period, elites have tended to steer clear of discussing school funding inequities and our outlier status on funding priorities compared to the rest of the industrialized world. I suspect that if one can find acknowledgements of that inequity from reformers—like Duncan’s from the Obama administration (see the quotation above)—it might be just like Duncan’s: a minor caveat buried in a speech that goes nowhere in terms of advocacy or policy. In other words, a real crisis and moral lapse left out of media amplification. I doubt most of the public knows about this inequity or our upside-down international status on this issue.

What elite reformers also didn’t do in the past four decades is attempt to *learn* from some of the most insightful critical thinkers in the field of education. That would require open-mindedness, humility, real compassion for disadvantaged students at the receiving end of reforms’ most perverse effects, and a genuine desire to help schools improve in their own ways. Instead, reformers have ignored the

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

intervening critiques of these thinkers and avoided moral debates—like with Alfie Kohn, the well-known critic of traditional schooling.

For example, elite reformers haven't dealt with Kohn's charge "that standardized testing and the whole 'Tougher Standards' obsession has squeezed the intellectual life out of schools in this country."¹¹⁵ They haven't dealt in public forums with his charge that "[every] hour spent preparing a student for [standardized] tests is an hour not spent on helping kids to become thinkers."¹¹⁶ In truth, how could elites acknowledge Kohn's charge "that [for elites] a successful model of *school change* consists of top down coercion"¹¹⁷ [my italics]? Acknowledging that might lead to criticisms that elites have created a two-tiered system with the worst effects of top-down reforms in schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged students. It would conflict with their projected self-image of acting as the *new civil rights vanguard*, which only makes sense in an Orwellian world.

Kohn says he often asks parents: "What do you want your kids to be like long after they've left you and left school? And everywhere people say: We want our kids to be caring, compassionate, creative, curious, life long learners, responsible decision-makers, good communicators, and so on."¹¹⁸ These qualities tend not to be valued by the elites responsible for imposing 'the permanent way'—on *other* people's children. However, these qualities often do seem valued by many of the schools least affected by top-down, anti-democratic, and anti-constructivist reforms; that is, private schools with progressive

¹¹⁵ Thuermer, K. (1999, Fall). In defense of the progressive school: An interview with Alfie Kohn. *Independent School*, 59(1).

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

values in affluent communities like where Senator Obama sent in his children in Chicago (John Dewey's famous Laboratory School, tuition at \$32,000 a year per child) and where, as U.S. President, he sent his children to school in Washington D.C. (Sidwell Friends, \$41,000 a year).

By contrast, it's extremely difficult to find which *public* schools in our society have managed to resist 'the permanent way' of K-12 educational reforms and remain true to, or discover for the first time, progressive—that is, democratic and constructivist—educational ideals, some of which could be summarized in the following way: "Education must...

- 1) amplify students' voice, agency, conscience, and intellect to create a more equitable, just, and sustainable world.
- 2) encourage the active participation of students in their learning, in their communities, and in the world.
- 3) respond to the developmental needs of students, and focus on their social, emotional, intellectual, cognitive, cultural, and physical development.
- 4) honor and nurture students' natural curiosity and innate desire to learn, fostering internal motivation and the discovery of passion and purpose.
- 5) emerge from the interests, experiences, goals, and needs of diverse constituents, fostering empathy, communication and collaboration across difference.

- 6) foster respectfully collaborative and critical relationships between students, educators, parents/guardians, and the community.”¹¹⁹

“We seek and honor a multiplicity of voices as we reflect on the query, How do we nurture a sense of belonging in our community and demonstrate our commitment to a just world?”¹²⁰

Sidwell Friends School

“Where students love to learn and learn to change the world. GDS believes that the educational development of the whole person requires comprehensive study of academic subjects, in-depth exposure to the arts, regular opportunities for physical education and athletics, and involvement in extracurricular activities and community service. Believing that each young person is unique and has special gifts, the School recognizes that identifying and fostering the growth of these individual talents is one of its most challenging responsibilities.”¹²¹

Georgetown Day School

“We’ve taken as truth whatever Bill Gates says.”¹²²

Valerie Strauss

While it’s extremely difficult to find which public schools have resisted ‘the permanent way’ (I imagine they’re mostly the public schools in wealthy neighborhoods), it’s much easier to find out where Washington D.C. elites send their own children. Alongside Sidwell Friends, there are places like Georgetown Day School (tuition \$39,730 - \$43,370), the Potomac School (\$38,550), and the Landon

¹¹⁹ Collins, T. (n.d.). *Harnessing the dynamic power of progressive practice for the next generation of students, schools, and democracy*. PEN - Progressive Education Network. <https://progressiveeducationnetwork.org/mission/>

¹²⁰ Sidwell Friends. (n.d.). *A Quaker education - Sidwell friends*. <https://www.sidwell.edu/a-quaker-education>

¹²¹ Georgetown Day School. (n.d.). *Our philosophy - Georgetown day school*. <https://www.gds.org/about/our-philosophy>

¹²² Freakonomics. (2012, April 2). *Are America’s schools failing . . . or thriving?* <https://freakonomics.com/2012/04/02/are-americas-schools-failing-or-thriving/>

School (\$41,290 - 44,960).¹²³ Throughout the country more generally, it's easy to locate Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf private schools embodying different aspects of the progressive tradition. (The closest Waldorf to me is in Orange County, California and the annual tuition for grades 1-12 range from \$19,250 - \$25,300 per child.) It's also easy to find out where billionaires like Bill Gates—who has done so much to preserve 'the permanent way' for other people's children—went to primary and secondary school: it's Lakeside School, the same as his own children (annual tuition at \$33,280 per child).

Lakeside's mission "is to develop in intellectually capable young people the creative minds, healthy bodies, and ethical spirits needed to contribute wisdom, compassion, and leadership to a global society."¹²⁴ That vision, similar to what Kohn says most parents want for their children, stands in stark contrast to the reality that's been created for most children in our society due to top-down reforms; prescriptions betraying reformers' lack of compassion for the children subjected to 'the permanent way' if only one takes the time to compare the two systems.

What set K-12 educational reforms on this course—what I call 'the permanent way'? Why have its advocates continually pretended to be on the side of helping the most disadvantaged students when their policies have mostly pressured schools—especially those in low-income communities—to look and operate *less and less* like schools in affluent communities?

¹²³ Niche. (n.d.). *2021 best high schools in the Washington, D.C. area*.

<https://www.niche.com/k12/search/best-high-schools/m/washington-dc-metro-area/>

¹²⁴ Lakeside School. (n.d.). *Mission & values - Lakeside school*. <https://www.lakesideschool.org/about-us/mission-and-values>

Dewey, the philosopher most associated with the progressive tradition in education, famously wrote:

“What the best and wisest parent wants for his child, that must we want for all the children of the community. Anything less is unlovely, and left unchecked, destroys our democracy.” That prescient moral vision does not reflect the actions of elites like Bush, Obama, Gates, and so many others.

Dewey’s moral principle couldn’t be more alien, more contrary to ‘the permanent way’ of K-12 educational reforms. How top-down “solutions” could further destroy democratic values in our society, a society already viewed by many as plutocratic—or, as the economist Simon Johnson phrased it, the “world’s most advanced oligarchy”¹²⁵ — is a perfect question for graduate schools of education to collectively pursue.

Incidentally, I have taught at four different elementary schools in my 18 years as a teacher in California and they have all been in low-income communities (88 to 95 percent on free or reduced price lunch).

Three out of the four displayed a variety of prison-like features, including dilapidated and uninspiring portable classrooms with bars on the windows. One had the persistent smell of a dead animal carcass in the crawl space below, which was strangely not recognized as a problem that needed to be remedied.

The public should compare schools in low-income communities to the stunning beauty of Sidwell Friends, the Laboratory School, Lakeside, and Waldorfs. There couldn’t be a more poignant divide between the *lovely* and *unlovely* in the educational experiences provided to advantaged and

disadvantaged students in America’s schools.

¹²⁵ Johnson, S. (2018a, September 8). *Simon Johnson: The quiet coup*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/05/the-quiet-coup/307364/>

Like Kohn, Yong Zhao is another critical thinker in education whom elites refuse to learn from and it's no surprise. Doing so might derail the entire logic behind decades of 'the permanent way' of K-12 educational reforms. That's because Zhao critiques one of the fundamental assumptions governing our educational system. As Zhao puts it, "Over the past two decades, Western nations such as the US, UK, and Australia have become increasingly infatuated with education in East Asia. This obsession originates in the simplistic and misguided view of *good test scores* as educational excellence"¹²⁶ [my italics]. This notion about test scores is so fundamental to conventional thinking in our culture it could be considered a religious-like faith or dogma. How often does anyone question testing as a sign of educational success in the mainstream media? In fact, I would argue it's seldom questioned in academia as well—an institution which has long utilized standardized tests for enrollment.

Thus, the infatuation with education in East Asia makes perfect sense given that countries in this region, like China, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan, represent the superstar performers on international student achievement tests, like PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study). Since our political and corporate elites mistake "test scores in a few subjects as the measure of educational quality," how could they *not* "come to the conclusion that Asian education was superior and worth emulating"?¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Zhao, Y. (2017b, September 18). *Yong Zhao: Fatal attraction: Why copying each other won't improve education?* National Education Policy Center.
https://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/fatal-attraction?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+NEPC-Blogs+%28NEPC+-+Blog+Post+of+the+Day%29

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Here’s an example of East Asia’s unambiguous testing superiority: Shanghai students got the top scores in reading, mathematics, and science on the PISA in 2009; prompting Arne Duncan, then-Secretary of Education in the Obama administration to warn, “We have to see this as a wake-up call.”¹²⁸ Since, in Duncan’s eyes, American students’ average scores were “mediocre,” he also said: “Americans need to wake up to this educational reality—instead of napping at the wheel while emerging competitors prepare their students for *economic leadership*”¹²⁹ [my italics]. Do reformers like Duncan believe that corporations like Apple, Microsoft, General Motors, Nike, PepsiCo, Target, and Walmart manufacture products in places like China due to the cultivation of economic leadership in the domestic population?

“And the jewel of China's education system, Shanghai, debuted this year as the highest scoring participant globally.”¹³⁰

Arne Duncan

In response to Shanghai’s dominance of the 2009 PISA, Chester E. Finn Jr., a former official in President Reagan’s Department of Education, exclaimed: “Wow, I’m kind of stunned. I’m thinking Sputnik.”¹³¹

¹²⁸ Dillon, S. (2010, December 7). Top test scores from Shanghai stun educators. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/education/07education.html>

¹²⁹ Duncan, A. (2010, December 7). *Secretary Arne Duncan’s remarks at OECD’s release of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 results*. U.S. Department of Education.

<https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/secretary-arne-duncans-remarks-oecd-s-release-program-international-student-assessment->

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Dillon, S. (2010, December 7). Top test scores from Shanghai stun educators. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/education/07education.html>

In 2012, Shanghai took the top spots in all three subjects as well with Singapore right behind in each category. In 2015, Singapore jumped to the top ranking in all three subjects on the PISA. Then, in 2018, China (represented by an agglomeration of Beijing-Shanghai-Jiangsu-Zhejiang), returned to the top ranking with Singapore right behind (followed by China-Macao, China-Hong Kong, Estonia, Japan, and South Korea).

How can Zhao dispute the consistent success of these PISA rankings? Zhao happens to know that many of these countries, including China, are ambivalent about their top-performing educational systems. Why? It's because these elites know that their star performance on international student achievement tests comes at a high price. In the words of the Education Commission in Hong Kong, the Chinese have excelled at producing an *exam-oriented education* that gives students “little room to think, explore and create.”¹³² In the words of the Chinese National Education Commission, a culture of high-stakes testing undermines students’ “motivation and enthusiasm, squelching their creativity, and impeding their overall development.”¹³³ Furthermore, elites in East Asia are aware of the problems associated with rote learning and “a disconnection between school learning and real-life situations.”¹³⁴

¹³² Zhao, Y. (2017, September 18). *Yong Zhao: Fatal attraction: Why copying each other won't improve education?* National Education Policy Center.

https://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/fatal-attraction?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+NEPC-Blogs+%28NEPC+-+Blog+Post+of+the+Day%29

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Zhao, Y. (2005). Increasing math and science achievement: The best and worst of the East and West. *Pbi Delta Kappan*, 87(3), 219-222.

“This [Western] effort to import East Asian educational practices amounts to a fatal attraction. In the words of a Chinese saying, it is ‘drinking poison to quench one’s thirst’. The West is thirsty for better education, but the practices it tries to emulate carry disastrous consequences as has been well recognized in their land of origin.”¹³⁵

Yong Zhao

These elites also have business goals in mind. Elites in China, for example, know that they dominate the *manufacturing* of the world’s most innovative products, like Apple’s i-Phones, but they want to dominate the *innovation* of such products. Similarly, it’s not lost on them that the global search among corporations for cheaper labor costs might change China’s dominance at the manufacturing end in the not too distant future.

Zhao even points out that a “contradictory relationship [exists] between test scores and entrepreneurship activities [within countries, which] is further affirmed by a comparison of PISA performance along with the entrepreneurship activities of nations. PISA scores in reading, math, and sciences are *negatively correlated* with entrepreneurship indicators in almost every category at statistically significant levels” [my italics].¹³⁶ Imagine the cognitive dissonance if this insight was relentlessly amplified by the mainstream media.

¹³⁵ Zhao, Y. (2017, September 18). *Yong Zhao: Fatal attraction: Why copying each other won’t improve education?* National Education Policy Center.

https://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/fatal-attraction?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+NEPC-Blogs+%28NEPC+-+Blog+Post+of+the+Day%29

¹³⁶ Zhao, Y. (2012). Flunking innovation and creativity. *Pbi Delta Kappan*, 94(1), 56-61.

“China needs (Steve) Jobs. .. We must have products like Apple’s that can dominate the world’s markets.”¹³⁷

China’s Premier Wen Jiabao

“Designed by Apple in California Assembled in China”¹³⁸

Labeling on the back of i-Phones

There’s another angle to this questioning of the status quo worth contemplating. Is compassion for the high price children have paid part of China’s re-evaluation? Zhao tells us, “East Asians have witnessed first-hand the horrendous damage of their education on children: high anxiety, excessive stress, poor eyesight, lack of confidence, low self-esteem, and lacking life skills. Both TIMSS and PISA have also documented that students in East Asia have lower confidence and less enjoyment in the subjects they study than their Western counterparts. They also value less the subjects they have higher test scores in than their peers in the West.”¹³⁹

Don’t elite reformers of ‘the permanent way’ need to “wake up to this educational reality”¹⁴⁰ to demonstrate *their* leadership?

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Merchant, B. (2017, June 18). Life and death in Apple’s forbidden city. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jun/18/foxconn-life-death-forbidden-city-longhua-suicide-apple-iphone-brian-merchant-one-device-extract>

¹³⁹ Zhao, Y. (2017, September 18). *Yong Zhao: Fatal attraction: Why copying each other won’t improve education?* National Education Policy Center.

https://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/fatal-attraction?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+NEPC-Blogs+%28NEPC+-+Blog+Post+of+the+Day%29

¹⁴⁰ Duncan, A. (2010, December 7). *Secretary Arne Duncan’s remarks at OECD’s release of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 results*. U.S. Department of Education.

<https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/secretary-arne-duncans-remarks-oecd-release-program-international-student-assessment>

So, what do the top educational performers in the world want to do about these problems? Zhao tells us that they want to prepare students for *fewer* high-stakes tests. They also want *less* centralization, *less* standardization, *less* narrowing of curriculum, *less* dependence on tests for university admissions, *less* rote learning, and *less* “extra tutoring sessions in after school hours or during summer and winter holidays.”¹⁴¹

By contrast, they want *more* local autonomy, *more* emphasis on “moral education, the arts, [and] physical education,”¹⁴² and “*more* student-centered and inquiry-based” education [my italics]; meaning *more* constructivism. Furthermore, these world leaders want to redefine their educational priorities “to include what are commonly known as 21st century skills: creativity, communication, collaboration, and higher-order thinking.”¹⁴³ (Do Chinese leaders want to leave out *critical* thinking? That tends to be among the 4 Cs.) On top of that, “they are also interested in students’ social, emotional and physical health.”¹⁴⁴

“I believe in standardizing automobiles. I do not believe in standardizing human beings.

Standardization is a great peril which threatens American culture.”¹⁴⁵

Albert Einstein

¹⁴¹ Zhao, Y. (2017, September 18). *Yong Zhao: Fatal attraction: Why copying each other won't improve education?* National Education Policy Center.
https://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/fatal-attraction?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+NEPC-Blogs+%28NEPC+-+Blog+Post+of+the+Day%29

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Einstein, A. (2013, September 24). *What Albert Einstein said about standardizing.* Diane Ravitch's Blog.
<https://dianeravitch.net/2013/09/24/what-albert-einstein-said-about-standardizing/>

It sounds to me like East Asian elites want to embrace the values of the progressive educational tradition found in many private schools in affluent communities in the United States; the same values ‘the permanent way’ has rejected for decades. Personally, I don’t believe that a society where worker “exploitation is routine,”¹⁴⁶ with suicide prevention nets around factory buildings, or where workers are required to “sign pledges stating they would not attempt to kill themselves,”¹⁴⁷ feels more *compassion* towards their children than elites in the United States. I suspect that East Asian elites have yet to differentiate, as their American counterparts have done albeit in a stealth fashion, between a test-oriented education for the vast majority and an often progressive, student-centered education for their own children. Or perhaps the sentiments of China’s growing middle-class has started to translate into mobilized pressure on government officials sympathetic to “the horrendous damage” China’s exam-oriented education has inflicted on their own children; that combined with knowing that superior testing is not an excellent entrepreneurial route for dominating future consumer markets.

“Woz, as [Steve Wozniak, Apple’s co-founder] is known, claimed that [Singapore’s] carefully managed society, where ‘bad behavior is not tolerated’ and ‘people are not taught to think for themselves’, puts Singapore at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to encouraging and nurturing creative talent.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Merchant, B. (2017, June 18). Life and death in Apple’s forbidden city. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jun/18/foxconn-life-death-forbidden-city-longhua-suicide-apple-iphone-brian-merchant-one-device-extract>

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Russell, J. (2011, December 15). ‘Where is the creativity in Singapore?’ Apple co-founder Wozniak asks. *TNW*.
<https://thenextweb.com/asia/2011/12/16/where-is-the-creativity-in-singapore-apple-co-founder-wozniak-asks/>

“Anyone who truly cares about children must be repelled by the insistence on ranking them, rating them, and labeling them. Whatever the tests measure is not the sum and substance of any child. The tests do not measure character, spirit, heart, soul, potential. When overused and misused, when attached to high stakes, the tests stifle the very creativity and ingenuity that our society needs most. Creativity and ingenuity stubbornly resist standardization. Tests should be used sparingly to help students and teachers, not to allocate rewards and punishments and not to label children and adults by their scores.”¹⁴⁹

Diane Ravitch



Zhao: Wrenches Galore, 2012

¹⁴⁹ Ravitch, D. (2013). *Reign of error: The hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools*. Vintage.

Essay 5: Shock Doctrine & Paper Sputnik

In the 1940s, psychiatry touted the use of electroshocks as a “new technology to cure mentally ill adults,”¹⁵⁰ as a public health film from that era advocated. The film tells us the practice allows scientists to wipe clean “the minds of sick patients...giving them a fresh start. On this blank slate, physicians then imprint a new, healthy personality.”¹⁵¹ Naomi Klein, the bestselling author and scholar-activist, explains that this process was about “[remaking] people, shocking them into obedience [and that in] the 1950s, it caught the attention of the CIA. The agency funded a series of experiments; out of them was produced a secret handbook on how to break down prisoners. The keys using shock to reduce adults to a childlike state. ... But these techniques don’t only work on individuals. They can work on whole societies—a collective trauma, a war, a coup, a natural disaster, a terror attack—puts us all into a state of shock. And, in the aftermath, like the prisoner in the interrogation chamber, we too become childlike, more inclined to follow leaders who claim to protect us.”¹⁵²

Apart from what I would call a cultural blindness to issues related to poverty in our society, what has allowed the stark differences between the educational experiences of advantaged and disadvantaged youth to become even starker due to the *real values* embedded in the modern era of educational reforms? How have these unjust, biased policies been normalized?

¹⁵⁰ Maclean’s. (2007, September 7). *Naomi Klein: The shock doctrine* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuyRdJupvU>

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

Keeping Klein’s theory of the *shock doctrine* in mind, I would argue that the top-down educational reforms of the past four decades are all indebted to a catalytic event that disseminated a message of *crisis*—a national crisis—in a way that shocked and galvanized the American public. This shock doctrine was the publication of the landmark federal report on education titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform (ANAR)* in 1983. How did it shock the public so successfully and into what I would describe as an obedient mindset for the biases of top-down solutions? It used what’s commonly called a *crisis rhetoric* (in this case, full of emotionally-charged war metaphors and nationalistic fervor) about the state of America’s schools. They were failing so badly that they put the entire nation at risk in terms of its economic well-being, its ‘superior’ standing in the world, its dominance in areas like “technological innovation.”¹⁵³ Never mind the long list of tech titans who dropped out of college, like Gates at Microsoft or Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, the Apple co-founders.

“What we now call school reform isn't the product of a gradual consensus emerging among educators about how kids learn; it's a political movement that grew out of one seed planted in 1983.”¹⁵⁴

Tamim Ansary

“The current standards-based reform movement took off in 1983 in response to the widely held view that America was at extreme economic risk, largely because of bad schools.”¹⁵⁵

Deborah Meier

¹⁵³ National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform. *The Elementary School Journal*, 84(2), 113-130.

¹⁵⁴ Ansary, T. (2007, March 09). Education at risk: Fallout from a flawed report. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/landmark-education-report-nation-risk>

¹⁵⁵ Meier, D. (2000, February). *Educating a democracy: Standards and the future of public education*. Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum. <https://bostonreview.net/archives/BR24.6/meier.html>

As NASA archivist Lee Saegesser noted twenty-five years after the fact: “Frankly, [the Sputnik hysteria] was a field day for certain interest groups. One could get quoted in the papers or invited to testify in front of a Congressional committee just by coming up with some statistic which showed how bad our schools were compared to those in Russia.”¹⁵⁶

Sputnik: The Shock of the Century

One scholar called *ANAR* “the rarest kind of government report, one that does not immediately disappear into the obscurity of a bookshelf.”¹⁵⁷ That’s because its crisis rhetoric “struck a responsive nerve in the body politic,”¹⁵⁸ cultivated in part by an endless stream of major newspaper articles and “feature [stories] on all the network television news shows.”¹⁵⁹ For example, “the *Washington Post* [carried] no fewer than 28 articles on it during the first month after [its] publication.”¹⁶⁰ Gerald Bracey, the scholar-activist, wrote that *ANAR* “is often referred to as the ‘paper Sputnik’ ...that riveted attention on education more than the original Sputnik,”¹⁶¹ which is another influential historical event in the long history of the specter of educational crisis.

The rhetorical manipulations of the public mind included lines in *ANAR* like the following:

¹⁵⁶ Dickson, P. (2001). *Sputnik: The shock of the century*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

¹⁵⁷ Lowitt, R. (2013). Keeping the Faith: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives: A Memoir. *The Journal of Southern History*, 79(2), 542.

¹⁵⁸ Guthrie, J. W., & Springer, M. G. (2004). A Nation at Risk Revisited: Did “Wrong” Reasoning Result in “Right” Results? At What Cost?. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 79(1), 7-35.

¹⁵⁹ Bell, T. H. (1993). Reflections one decade after a nation at risk. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 74(8), 592.

¹⁶⁰ Bracey, G. (2006). Getting the word out challenges and opportunities in explaining educational research to the world. *The Sage Handbook for Research in Education*, 543-561.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

“Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world.”¹⁶²

“...the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”¹⁶³

“If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”¹⁶⁴

“We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.”¹⁶⁵

Incidentally, that line equating *bad schools* to *military disarmament* came out a month after President Reagan’s famous “Evil Empire” speech about the Soviet Union in 1983.¹⁶⁶

It’s not often noted, but the last two lines insinuate that teachers and principals—the ones who end up ‘needing to be held accountable’ by elite accountabilists—have been acting like foreign enemies or internal saboteurs. If one reads Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*, then one knows how

¹⁶² National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform. *The Elementary School Journal*, 84(2), 113-130.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Wikipedia contributors. (2021d, March 20). *Evil empire speech*. Wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evil_Empire_speech#:~:text=The%20%22Evil%20Empire%22%20speech%20was,evil%20in%20the%20modern%20world%22.

often elites demonize in this way—to move the body politic in elite-friendly directions. Perhaps this type of fearmongering helps us to understand how Rod Paige, Secretary of Education under President George W. Bush, could compare the largest teachers’ union, the National Educational Association (NEA), to a “terrorist organization”¹⁶⁷ in 2004 (less than three years after the al-Qaeda attacks on September 11, 2001). From the elite worldview, I think Paige’s mistake was being too explicit about his own emotional judgments rather than hiding behind artful rhetoric, like *ANAR*.

ANAR’s ‘evidence’ for failing schools mostly came from standardized test scores, like on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The ‘evidence’ for low student achievement on standardized tests negatively impacting the economy mostly came from these examples: (1) “the Japanese [are making] automobiles more efficiently than Americans,” (2) “the South Koreans [had] recently built the world’s most efficient steel mill,” and (3) German machine tools were now displacing American products in that industry.¹⁶⁸ Based on these absurd justifications it’s worth noting just how easy *ANAR*’s crisis rhetoric skipped over questions about de-industrialization, the offshoring of jobs for cheaper labor, and poor corporate decision-making. Instead, it jumped right to the implication that schools were ‘supplying inferior students’ to businesses. Thus, for instance, schools must be responsible for Honda’s success over Chrysler and Ford. Wouldn’t every business like to shirk responsibility in that way? Every government?

¹⁶⁷ CNN. (2004, February 24). *Education chiefs’ “terrorist” remark ignites fury*. CNN.Com. <https://edition.cnn.com/2004/EDUCATION/02/24/paige.terrorist.nea/index.html>

¹⁶⁸ National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. *The Elementary School Journal*, 84(2), 113-130.

"Our nation is still at risk."¹⁶⁹

Betsy DeVos

"Students analyze issues of international trade and explain how the U.S. economy affects, and is affected by, economic forces beyond the United States's borders."¹⁷⁰

California History Standards 12.6

One of the best rebuttals to *ANAR*'s manipulative rhetoric came from the educational historian Lawrence Cremin in 1990. In response to *ANAR*'s claim that our inferior schools were threatening our society's competitive economic capacities, Cremin wrote: "American economic competitiveness with Japan and other nations is to a considerable degree a function of monetary, trade, and industrial policy, and of decisions made by the President and Congress, the Federal Reserve Board, and the Federal Departments of the Treasury, Commerce, and Labor. Therefore, to conclude that problems of international competitiveness can be solved by educational reform, especially educational reform defined solely as school reform, is not merely utopian and millennialist [believing in a paradise to come], it is at best a foolish and at worst a crass effort to direct attention away from those truly responsible for doing something about competitiveness and to lay the burden instead upon schools. It is a device that has been used repeatedly in the history of American education."¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Kamenetz, A. (2018, April 29). *What "a nation at risk" got wrong, and right, about U.S. schools*. NPR.Org. <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/04/29/604986823/what-a-nation-at-risk-got-wrong-and-right-about-u-s-schools>

¹⁷⁰ California Department of Education. (2000). *History-social science content standards for California public schools*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/histsocscistnd.pdf>

¹⁷¹ Cremin, L. A. (1990). *Popular education and its discontents*. HarperCollins Publishers.

Now, in the 21st century, isn't it clear that the endless recycling of that specter is beyond *crass*? It's an unscrupulous device for manipulating the body politic against their own interests and economic well-being. *ANAR* helped elites in their endless quest to *pose* as the actors looking out for everyone's economic well-being when in truth their policy agendas were doing the exact opposite.

When *ANAR* was published, the nation's economic well-being (like a sick patient) *was* at risk; it came out in the wake of the worst economic recession at that point in history since the Great Depression (1929 - 1939).¹⁷² The first recession occurred in 1980 and the second, when unemployment soared, began in 1981 and officially 'ended' in 1982. Thus, the inchoate sense in the body politic of something being wrong with *what was happening* in American society reflected the economic reality. But what actually caused those recessions? Did it have anything to do with a drop in standardized test scores or a decline in graduating students' overall intelligence once out in the real world? That was *ANAR*'s insinuation: the buck goes back to schools. I would argue that in the relative absence of an adversarial media and critical thinkers in academia challenging this insinuation—speaking truth to the propagandized populace—the crisis rhetoric won the non-debate in the popular culture. That's what set up America's schools for 'the permanent way' of reforms.

In retrospect, can you imagine a standardized test asking high school seniors if inflation reaching a staggering 14.8 percent in 1980 (the average rate in 2019 was 1.8 percent) occurred due to a drop in

¹⁷² *Slaying the dragon of debt: 1980-82 early 1980s recession*. (2011, March 7). Regional Oral History Office of The Bancroft Library. <https://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/projects/debt/1980srecession.html>

SAT scores? Or if seniors were asked to predict how current SAT scores would affect the overall economy in years to come?

“Students analyze the influence of the federal government on the American economy.”¹⁷³

California History Standards 12.3

Can you imagine students being asked if the Federal Reserve pushing interest rates to an unrivaled 22 percent in 1980 and 1981 (the average high during Trump’s presidency by the Spring of 2020 was 1.7 percent)¹⁷⁴ negatively affected the economy more or less than the impact of standardized tests? Or if unemployment climbing to its highest level since the Great Depression—10.8 percent in 1982—negatively affected the stability of families more or less than the impact of SAT scores from disadvantaged students?¹⁷⁵ *Were the test scores of students living in poverty behind the offshoring of what were once middle-class jobs? Or has the offshoring for cheaper labor increased economic insecurity for American families?*

From that perspective, shouldn’t we view the educational specter as a farcical scapegoating of the most powerless in our society by the most powerful? Doesn’t the “paper Sputnik” teach us the extent to which shock doctrines can be used to manipulate the body politic? I can’t help but think of that

¹⁷³ California. Department of Education. (2000). *History-social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*. California Department of Education.

¹⁷⁴ Macrotrends. (n.d.). *Federal funds rate - 62 year historical chart*. <https://www.macrotrends.net/2015/fed-funds-rate-historical-chart>

¹⁷⁵ Wikipedia contributors. (2021, February 18). *Early 1980s recession*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_1980s_recession#:~:text=The%20early%201980s%20recession%20in,began%20to%20afflict%20the%20economy.

specter as a window into our *nation's soul*, or rather our worst vulnerabilities as a society—a populace endlessly primed for exploitation and deception by elite manipulations.

In truth, one can sense the *economic illiteracy* afflicting most of us from some of the hypothetical test questions above when it comes to topics such as inflation, federal funds interest rates, unemployment, and other real factors affecting the overall economy. I inserted comparative statistics because I assumed the numbers from the 1980s by themselves would be meaningless to most readers, as they were for me.

If I hadn't framed *ANAR's* insinuations in an absurdist light, then one might sense the attraction of simplistic explanations for problems with the perceptual salience of identifying low-performing students (*Oh, they must be poor*) or bad teachers (*Oh, I've known some*) to describe something that's just the opposite—economic crises which are complex and remote from most people's thinking. In truth, the factors that affect test scores are also complex, but it's easy to neglect factors like the income-achievement gap, poverty, or negative working conditions since elites either ignore or trivialize them. As topics, their situational complexity has too little, if any, established traction in our collective thinking.

Imagine the following statement on a standardized test: “In a matter of a few years in the 1980s, the United States transformed itself from the world's largest creditor nation to the world's largest debtor nation and debt of every kind continued to rise.”¹⁷⁶ Do you believe this transition occurred mostly due

¹⁷⁶ Magnuson, J. (2011). *Mindful economics: how the US economy works, why it matters, and how it could be different*. Seven Stories Press.

to A) the nation’s average student achievement rates on standardized tests from the 1960s and 70s; B) the average student achievement rates of low-income students on standardized tests from the 1960s and 70s; C) the mean grade point average (G.P.A.) of low-income students from the 1960s and 70s; or D) economic policies from the 1970s and early 1980s?

What would a polling company like Gallup have found if they had been asking the public a survey question like the one above for the past four decades? How would politicians have answered differently than the public?

“Students analyze issues of international trade and explain how the U.S. economy affects, and is affected by, economic forces beyond the United States’s borders.”¹⁷⁷

California History Standards 12.6

“There are no more excuses, as far as I’m concerned, about not teaching children how to read”¹⁷⁸

President George W. Bush

“There is no excuse for the failure of most public schools to teach poor children.”¹⁷⁹

Samuel Casey Carter

On the *Working Economics Blog*, Richard Rothstein, the scholar-activist, wrote: “Years ago, the Heritage Foundation published a report called *No Excuses*, by Samuel Casey Carter. Among others, one school it found enrolled a majority of children who were eligible for subsidized lunches yet who

¹⁷⁷ California. Department of Education. (2000). *History-social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*. California Department of Education.

¹⁷⁸ Manna, P. (2006). Control, persuasion, and educational accountability: Implementing the no child left behind act. *Educational Policy*, 20(3), 471-494.

¹⁷⁹ Carter, S. C. (2000). *No excuses: Lessons from 21 high-performing, high-poverty schools*. Heritage Foundation, 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE, Washington, DC 20002.

still had high achievement. According to the report, this (along with other, equally flawed examples) proved that poverty is no bar to high achievement. The school in question was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and it turned out that the students mostly had parents who were graduate students at Harvard or MIT, whose stipends were low enough that their children were eligible for the lunch program.”¹⁸⁰

Here’s another question: What’s the likelihood that an undergraduate course on economic recessions (e.g., the Great Depression, the early 1980s recessions, the Great Recession, the Coronavirus recession, etc.) would *ever* delve into the ‘ripple effects’ of rising or falling SAT scores among disadvantaged students as an explanatory factor? The notion is nonsensical outside of artful, indirect political rhetoric.

However, if an elite-activist were teaching such a course, then how would that person explain examples like Japan leading “the world in test scores and economic growth in the 1980s but [then see] its economy sink into the Pacific in the 1990s”?¹⁸¹ As Bracey argued, “Throughout this period, Japanese students continued to ace tests, but Japan’s economy sputtered into the new century and slipped back into recession in 2007.”¹⁸² It appears test scores are relatively stable for wide sectors of the population; unlike the real factors destabilizing an economy, like wage stagnation and “[income] inequality... suppressing growth in aggregate demand.”¹⁸³ I think examples like the ones given here show how

¹⁸⁰ Rothstein, R. (2013, October 8). *Does “poverty” cause low achievement?* Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/blog/poverty-achievement/>

¹⁸¹ Bracey, G. (2009). The Big Tests: What Ends Do They Serve?. *Educational Leadership*, 67(3), 32-37.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Bivens, J. (2017, December 12). *Inequality is slowing U.S. economic growth: Faster wage growth for low- and middle-wage workers is the solution*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/secular-stagnation/>

manipulative elites can be in training the body politic not to question their narratives or hold them accountable for the effects of their economic policies on the vast majority.

“Those who control the narrative control the world.”¹⁸⁴

Caitlin Johnstone

Briefly, if *ANAR*'s shock doctrine provided an emotional explanation for that inchoate perception in the 1980s—the one cultivated by elites to frame economic distress as a sign of failing schools—then what real explanations might have been sought? I am as blind about economic policies and realities as I imagine most people in our culture, but we might have been led by trustworthy thinkers to contemplate a variety of factors (some of which became clearer later), such as:

- 1) “...the unemployment rate for lower class workers [and minorities] is always much higher than for upper class ones.”¹⁸⁵ For example, “[the] unemployment rate for African-Americans... topped 20 percent by 1983.”¹⁸⁶ That’s almost double the worst overall rate at the time (10.8 percent) and approaching the general peak rate of 24.9 percent in 1933 during the Great Depression. Mainstream news outlets might have been less susceptible to *ANAR*'s shock doctrine if they were more attuned to the effects of economic recessions on non-white groups.

¹⁸⁴ Johnstone, C. (2020, July 29). *Those who control the narrative control the world - Caitlin Johnstone*. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfcTp6J7NRg>

¹⁸⁵ Spross, J. (2016, April 19). *The forgotten recession that irrevocably damaged the American economy*. The Week.Com.

<https://theweek.com/articles/618964/forgotten-recession-that-irrevocably-damaged-american-economy>

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

- 2) “After the Volcker recession [in the 1980s, named after the chair of the Federal Reserve], full employment—when there are more jobs available than workers, so employers have to bargain up wages and work conditions—basically disappeared. Union membership had already fallen 5 percentage points from roughly 1960 to 1980. But after the Volcker recession, its decline *accelerated*, falling another 10 percentage points from 1980 to roughly 1995”¹⁸⁷ [my italics]. Mainstream media outlets might have been less susceptible to *ANAR*’s shock doctrine if they were more attuned to labor issues and the effects of de-unionization (and de-industrialization for that matter) on the lower and middle classes. Why aren’t they more attuned to those issues? Why do they prefer elite-friendly narratives?
- 3) The 1981-82 recessions mark the moment in U.S. history when income inequality began to accelerate to the extreme levels that exist today. In other words, “the top 1 percent ... started gobbling up a much larger share of national income.”¹⁸⁸ At the same time “hourly compensation [for ordinary workers] stagnated and disengaged from productivity growth, and it was when family income growth in the bottom 80 percent of the economy slowed way down.”¹⁸⁹ From a historical view, annual family household income *growth* for all quintiles (e.g., from the bottom fifth to the top fifth) were remarkably equal from 1947 to 1979—all ranging from 2.2 to 2.5 percent growth. Incidentally, the average annual growth for the top 5 percent of earners during that period was 1.9 percent (i.e., *lower* growth for the richest 5 percent than the quintile groups). However, these rates changed dramatically from 1979 to 1989 to 0.4

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

percent *negative* growth for the bottom fifth (i.e., the poorest), 0.3 percent growth for the second fifth, 0.6 percent for the middle fifth, 1.0 percent for the fourth fifth, 2.0 percent for the top fifth, and 2.8 percent for the top 5 percent. This change represents an economic shift from “broadly shared growth” for several decades to “concentrated-at-the-top growth,” which has continued to the present.¹⁹⁰ This is the world we inhabit that the specter of educational crisis is designed to obscure. It’s worth emphasizing that *all* quintiles—from the poorest to the richest—had *lower* average annual income growth after 1980 compared to the economics of broadly shared prosperity from the previous era. All quintiles did better! Further, it’s worth pointing out that average annual growth followed a well-ordered socioeconomic class gradient: lowest for the poorest to highest for the top 5 percent.

- 4) In 2010, two political scientists, Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, framed these types of numerical data (which often fail to provoke an emotion) in an accessible, compelling narrative in the book, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—And Turned Its Back on the Middle Class*. In it, the scholars compare two time periods: the decades of broadly shared prosperity after WW II (named Broadland in their book) and the decades of hyperconcentration of income at the top from 1979 to 2007 (which they refer to as Richistan). One compelling fact is that they show what would’ve happened if the shift from Broadland economics to Richistan’s never took hold in the 1980s. In other words, “[if] the economy had grown at the same rate as it actually did yet inequality had not increased.”¹⁹¹ In that scenario,

¹⁹⁰ Mishel, L., Bivens, J., Gould, E., & Shierholz, H. (2012). *The state of working America*. Cornell University Press.

¹⁹¹ Hacker, J. S., & Pierson, P. (2010). *Winner-take-all politics: How Washington made the rich richer--and turned its back on the middle class*. Simon and Schuster.

“the average income of the middle fifth of households would be over \$12,000 higher today”¹⁹² (in 2010 numbers). Furthermore, “[the] average income of the bottom fifth of households [i.e., the poorest] would be more than \$5,800 higher.”¹⁹³ In fact, the scholars show that the bottom *90 percent of all earners* would be richer under the economics of Broadland, which is not “some hyperegalitarian world in which the rich get ‘soaked’; rather it’s a world in which the rich simply experience the same income growth rate as everyone else, just as they basically had before the late 1970s.”¹⁹⁴ The bottom 90 percent of earners in our society would have done better economically! This fact teaches us why elites need “failing” schools so badly. Why the specter of educational crisis is never-ending or endlessly recycled. Why elite “cures” keep needing to be imposed on schools as the *cure-all* for economic distress.

These are just examples of topics and data the mainstream media might have explored—from the vantage point of the 1980s at first—to understand the more subtle and insidious economic distress gripping the public in the wake of the economic recessions of the early 1980s. I believe this was the hidden context that helped *ANAR* strike a responsive nerve in the body politic. It channeled an inchoate sense that something was deeply wrong in American society—which was real—and gave it a framing that was salient and made emotional sense to people since frustrations with schooling and teachers are familiar to the entire population, as opposed to their knowledge about economic policies and their effects on the vast majority. And the mainstream media—in their laziness,

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

anti-intellectualism, or internalized subordination—complied. Through a shock doctrine, *ANAR* exploited a bias in the public mind not all that different from political demagogues exploiting racist biases or xenophobia in the body politic as a way of deflecting attention from the root causes of oppression and increased instability in the lives of most people. The 2016 U.S. Presidential election is a perfect example of that kind of manipulation.

“Perceptions are real... They color what we see... what we believe... how we behave. They can be managed... to motivate behavior... to create positive business results.”¹⁹⁵

Mahzarin R. Banaji

ANAR hit a responsive chord in the public because of the growing instability produced by Richistan economics, but its resonance could be attributed to another real crisis I have yet to mention here. I’m thinking of the lack of critical thinking, skepticism, historical awareness, attunement to the plight of racial and ethnic minorities, and skills in investigative journalism among professionals in the mainstream media. To put it another way, the shock doctrine worked due to the media’s inability to see beyond the crisis rhetoric against America’s schools, particularly in the wake of two economic recessions. In the tradition of the Fourth Estate, isn’t it the job of the media to act as the first line of defense against the abuse of state-corporate power?

¹⁹⁵ Banaji, M. R. (2001). *Ordinary prejudice. Fourth Annual Arthur Liman Public Interest Program Colloquium: Encountering the Criminal Law*. Yale Law School.

One could argue that the two most influential moments of the crisis rhetoric against schools—the scapegoating in the late 1950s during the Sputnik hysteria and *ANAR*'s shock doctrine from the 1980s—don't teach us anything about the quality of our schools, but perhaps do indirectly point to the incompetence of mainstream journalists to think critically, expose propaganda, and speak truth to the populace. *But is it really incompetence or just normalized conformity to elite-friendly narratives and state-corporate power?*

“The schools are in terrible shape. What has long been an ignored national problem, Sputnik has made a recognized crisis.”¹⁹⁶

Life magazine

“It seemed for a while that all the critics of United States public education, so vociferous since the war [World War II], had just about shot their bolt. Then came Sputnik.”¹⁹⁷

Time magazine

Perhaps the endless recycling of the educational specter also teaches us about the failures of academia to disseminate the truth (already laid out in mostly inaccessible or barely read journals) to wide audiences beyond the Ivory Tower. It makes me question why the leadership in academia is seemingly content with non-intervening interventions.

¹⁹⁶ Herold, J. (1974). Sputnik in American education: A history and reappraisal. *McGill Journal of Education/Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 9(002).

¹⁹⁷ Time. (1957, December 2). *Education: What price life adjustment?* TIME.Com. <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,825347,00.html>

Essay 6: The School Reform Orthodoxy

“Propaganda is making puppets of us. We are moved by hidden strings which the propagandist manipulates.”¹⁹⁸

Everett Dean Martin

“Education is... the only sure path out of poverty and the only way to achieve a more equal and just society.”¹⁹⁹

Arne Duncan

A Nation at Risk (ANAR) moved the body politic in a direction that benefited elites in incalculable ways. It’s the catalyst for the educational reform movement still shaping the policy agenda in K-12 education and the way we collectively think about reforms. It blamed the U.S.’s bad economic outcomes on failing schools; deflecting attention at the time of its publication from policies central to the root causes of the worst economic recessions (1981-82) at that point in U.S. history since the Great Depression. It deflected attention from the policy shifts underway before and after the recessions that would generate less tangible (i.e., less reported on) social and economic instability for the vast majority, and especially for disadvantaged groups. It inculcated the belief that better schools and competent teachers were the surest way to better economic futures for everyone now living in a society much different than before the 1980s—a society now ruled by Richistan economics.

¹⁹⁸ Robinson, G. (2019). *Mass Communication and Journalism*. Scientific e-Resources.

¹⁹⁹ Meek, C. (2011, May 25). Is education a civil right? *HuffPost*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/is-education-a-civil-right_b_533446

After the early 1980s recessions I think elites increasingly realized the crisis rhetoric against schools could serve as an all-purpose form of scapegoating for bad economic outcomes and the inchoate discontent they generate in the body politic. This was serendipitous because there would be much to deflect from due to the increasing systemic effects of anti-egalitarian, neoliberal economic policies, which became economic orthodoxy for America's two-party duopoly in the 1980s, and still persists today. Chomsky's *Requiem for the American Dream: The 10 Principles of Concentration of Wealth & Power* (the book or documentary) is a compelling and accessible account of this anti-egalitarian assault on the American public—the *real* crisis, I would argue, obfuscated by the political theatrics manipulating the public mind.

“...one of the most fascinating elements of neoliberalism is how its ideas, its rise, its ensuing power and even its very existence are still unknown to most people today. Ask anyone you know, even someone who seems particularly attuned to politics or economics, and they will likely struggle to define neoliberalism for you or recall much of its history. In a society that's been neoliberal for as long as ours has this is extraordinary.”²⁰⁰

Barak Bullock

"The hallmark of the fourth estate is that it scrutinizes the actions of public officials and political institutions in the interest of the public, serving as a watchdog that holds the other three estates (the legislation, the executive and the judiciary) accountable for their actions."²⁰¹

Hanis Jazil

²⁰⁰ Bullock, B. (2018, March 1). *This is neoliberalism: Introducing the invisible ideology (part 1)* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myH3gg5o0t0&t=124s>

²⁰¹ Jazil, H. (2018, August 20). *What is the fourth estate and some of its ideals? Is it relevant in today's society?* Medium.Com. <https://medium.com/@hanisjazil/what-is-the-fourth-estate-and-some-of-its-ideals-is-it-relevant-in-todays-society-931901285b99>

The next essay in this collection gives more information on the increasing systemic effects of anti-egalitarian economic policies favoring the top 1 percent. Since shorthand is helpful in complicated conversations,²⁰² I'll be referring to these effects as a sign of our society's *perverse exceptionalism* among industrialized nations; a topic central to understanding why elites need to endlessly recycle the specter of educational crisis—the reasons 'cures' need to be imposed.

By perverse exceptionalism I mean to point out how the U.S. has become an outlier—'exceptional'—compared to the rest of the industrialized world in terms of indices on outcomes such as unaffordable healthcare, infant mortality, income and wealth inequality, social mobility, and child poverty. I believe these indices reflect the roots of the real crises affecting most people—the bottom 80 to 90 percent—in American society due to Richistan economics. Those are the societal problems the mainstream news outlets—if they were true to the vision of journalism as the Fourth Estate—would be stressing to the public rather than echoing the endlessly recycled specter of educational crisis. Those problems reflect many of the entangled factors behind the income-achievement gap in schools.

²⁰² Pinar, W. (2011, November 5). *A complicated conversation with William Pinar: A reader response to "From Autobiography to Allegory."* A Canadian Curriculum Theory Project. <https://www.curriculumtheoryproject.ca/2011/11/a-complicated-conversation-with-william-pinar-a-reader-response-to-from-autobiography-to-allegory/>

If mainstream news outlets took an adversarial stance towards political power rather than acting like “servants,” “mouthpieces,” and “appendages” to it—as cleverly described by the Pulitzer Prize winning investigative journalist Glenn Greenwald—then perhaps our ranking on those indices would be common knowledge in our society and the educational specter might be viewed as a comical attempt by elites to deflect the public’s attention from plutocratic agendas.²⁰³

It’s also important to see the flipside of Greenwald’s description of the corporate media acting as servants to the political establishment. In other words, it’s important to see politicians as *public servants* to corporate power or government as “the perverted servant of special interests.”²⁰⁴

In an essay from the early 1930s, John Dewey, the American philosopher, famously called “politics... [in America] the shadow cast on society by big business.”²⁰⁵ In fact, Dewey explicitly described the Republican and Democratic political parties as “servants of big business.”²⁰⁶ Dewey wrote those words during a time of extreme income inequality often compared to our own era (e.g., “Income Inequality Has Returned to Gilded Age Levels”²⁰⁷). It amazes me that after all these decades Dewey’s critique still holds true. I can only think that our society is deeply ensnared by a hegemonic common sense that keeps us—our thinking—locked into this status quo.

²⁰³ Calderone, M. (2013, June 25). *Glenn Greenwald: “Meet The Press” interview validates “incestuous” Washington media critique.* HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/glenn-greenwald-meet-the-press_n_3491290

²⁰⁴ Diggs, B. J. (1973). The common good as reason for political action. *Ethics*, 83(4), 283-293.

²⁰⁵ Johnson, J. (2016, July 21). *John Dewey was right: American politics is merely the shadow cast by big business.* Common Dreams. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2016/07/21/john-dewey-was-right-american-politics-merely-shadow-cast-big-business>

²⁰⁶ Dewey, J. (2008). *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 6, 1925-1953: 1931-1932, Essays, Reviews, and Miscellany.* Southern Illinois University.

²⁰⁷ Inequality.org. (2020, February 27). *Income Inequality.* <https://inequality.org/facts/income-inequality/>

If only we had more critical thinkers like the late philosopher, Greenwald, and Chomsky speaking truth to the propagandized populace about state-corporate power in our society. Then perhaps we would be accustomed to more *comforting of the afflicted and afflicting of the comfortable*.

The mainstream news outlets tend to amplify elite-friendly narratives, particularly if the ideas involved have dual support from both of our dominant political parties. Doubtless, the specter of educational crisis fits that historical bipartisan agenda.

I hope my essay, *America's Perverse Exceptionalism*, demonstrates that many of these perverse societal outcomes, such as having one of the highest rates of income inequality in the industrialized world, have gotten worse since the 1980s. I think of the 1980s as the meeting ground for the catalyst of the modern school reform movement and the accelerated shift toward anti-egalitarian, neoliberalism.

Part of M.I.T.'s mission statement goes as follows: "The Institute is committed to generating, disseminating, and preserving knowledge, and to working with others to bring this knowledge to bear on the world's great challenges."²⁰⁸ This mission statement applies in a perverse way to U.S. educational reforms because what politicians routinely generate and disseminate in order to catalyze reforms is not *knowledge* in M.I.T.'s sense; far more often it's propaganda—it's political rhetoric, myths, and disinformation. That's what 'the permanent way' of educational reforms is about: elites

²⁰⁸ Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (n.d.). *MIT Facts 2020: Mission*. MIT.Edu. <https://web.mit.edu/facts/mission.html>

bringing *propaganda* to bear on the great challenge of improving K-12 education in our society. So, the question then becomes: what media platforms are left to us for challenging ‘the permanent way’?

Due to the decades-long success of the specter of educational crisis during our own era of standardization and ‘accountability’ (and in previous eras as well) I suggest referring to this ideology as the *school reform orthodoxy*. This term emphasizes that the rhetoric, demonizing myths, and disinformation employed by elites to frame educational reforms have far more in common with propaganda and indoctrinated beliefs than an honest reflection of the research evidence. I think ‘orthodoxy’ brings to mind the right connotations for the dominant beliefs being generated, disseminated, and preserved in the culture by powerful interests. That’s because orthodoxy connotes dogma, official doctrines, appeals to emotion, and a minimal reliance on evidence. It makes one think about prescribed beliefs that go unquestioned or even unnoticed. I think these connotations are more resonant in the wider culture than the ones attached to another term that’s been used in a similar way in the academic literature—the reform *paradigm*. In any case, both orthodoxy and paradigm suggest a conventional wisdom related to “deeply held assumptions and beliefs that ultimately drive behavior.”²⁰⁹

“For any system of thought to become dominant, it requires the articulation of fundamental concepts that become so deeply embedded in commonsense understandings that they are taken for granted and beyond question. For this to occur, not any old concepts will do. A conceptual apparatus has to be

²⁰⁹ Systems Innovation. (2020, August 18). *Iceberg model explained*. <https://www.systemsinnovation.io/post/iceberg-model-explained>

constructed that appeals almost naturally to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities that seem to inhere in the social world we inhabit.”²¹⁰

David Harvey

I must admit I’m also drawn to the word ‘orthodoxy’ because there’s such a rich history of meanings attached to the Greek word ‘doxa’ that resonates in this context. For example, in the free article *Introduction to the Study of Doxa*, the Romanian theorist Ruth Amossy explains that “doxa appears under various guises, such as public opinion, verisimilitude, commonsense knowledge, commonplace, idée reçue [received ideas], stereotype, cliché.”²¹¹ Thus, with M.I.T.’s mission statement in mind, we might think about the difference between opportunistic elites generating and disseminating an ideology that *becomes* public opinion versus researchers informing the public about their knowledge and understanding of important societal issues. The latter approach is about *advancing* knowledge for the Common Good while the former is about *advancing* propaganda for—we might call it—the Good of the Elites (or, in Aristotle’s language, to uphold “the interests of the rulers”).²¹²

Should university scholars remain content advancing knowledge in insular, academic channels while state-corporate power advances propaganda in the society at large? Is that divide acceptable? It seems Karl Marx’s famous epigrammatic challenge from his *Theses on Feuerbach* (“Philosophers have hitherto

²¹⁰ Harvey, D. (2006). Neo-Liberalism as creative destruction. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 88(2), 145-158.

²¹¹ Amossy, R. (2002). Introduction to the Study of Doxa. *Poetics Today*, 23(3), 369-394.

²¹² Brownsword, R., Scotford, E., & Yeung, K. (Eds.). (2017). *The Oxford handbook of law, regulation and technology*. Oxford University Press.

only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”²¹³) desperately needs to be at the forefront of academic thinking in the 21st century. Why isn't it?

I think elites require subservient thinking in the body politic in part so that people don't question why top-down solutions never seem to end the “educational crisis” justifying their imposition from one decade to the next. If the vast majority understood that the crisis rhetoric against schools has actually been around for more than a century, would they then start to question its veracity? Would they start to question the intent of its purveyors? What would teachers think about our political system if they understood the extent to which it manipulates the public to deflect accountability from itself and scapegoat schools?

In terms of our response to this orthodoxy, what I think we need most are *intercessions* in Zinn's use of the word, such as resonant heterodox critiques disseminated to the public that challenge elite-friendly narratives and de-indoctrinate us; that de-parasitize our minds; that de-parasitize our unconscious thinking. And then from there—mobilizing resistance.

"Personally, I think that Jung has deceived himself. Jung locates the collective unconscious in the inherited cerebral matter. But the collective unconscious, without our having to fall back on... genes, is purely and simply the sum of prejudices, myths, collective attitudes of a given group."²¹⁴

Frantz Fanon

²¹³ Wikipedia contributors. (2021b, January 23). *Theses on Feuerbach*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theses_on_Feuerbach

²¹⁴ Gibson, N. C., & Beneduce, R. (2017). *Frantz Fanon, psychiatry and politics*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Essay 7: America's Perverse Exceptionalism

“Of course, the U.S. is unique. And just as we have the world’s most advanced economy, military, and technology, we also have its most advanced oligarchy.”²¹⁵

Simon Johnson

Yanis Varoufakis, the Greek economist, told an audience at the Cambridge Forum in Massachusetts in 2018: “We live in pure, iron-clad oligarchies which... require, for legitimation purposes and their reproduction, that *we think* we live in democracies”²¹⁶ [my italics]. Interestingly, Varoufakis compares the deception needed to maintain the status quo to the dystopian film, *The Matrix*.

While the mainstream media have amplified the crisis rhetoric about “failing” schools harming our nation’s ‘economic well-being’, they rarely seem to probe the historical evidence from the past four decades on the effects of our political system on improving *general societal well-being*.²¹⁷ The media neglect this task despite compelling reasons for such an inquiry and, let’s not forget, the educational specter has long opened up a precedent for international comparisons. Which nations have ‘outperformed’ ours on improving societal well-being and why?

The media neglect this task even though the sharpest critiques aren’t all locked inside academia for insulated debates. For example, the media might spotlight the highly readable book *Winner-Take-All*

²¹⁵ Johnson, S. (2018, September 8). The quiet coup. *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/05/the-quiet-coup/307364/>

²¹⁶ Varoufakis, Y. (2018, May 17). *Yanis Varoufakis: Is capitalism devouring democracy?* YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGeevtdp1WQ&t=5222s>

²¹⁷ Stiglitz, J. D. (2009, September 1). *Moving beyond market fundamentalism to a more balanced economy*. Wiley Online Library.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1467-8292.2009.00389.x>

Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—And Turned Its Back on the Middle Class by the political scientists Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson. In it, one learns that:

“...[a] generation ago, the United States was a recognizable, if somewhat more unequal, member of the cluster of affluent democracies known as mixed economies, where fast growth was widely shared. No more. Since around 1980, we have drifted away from that mixed-economy cluster, and traveled a considerable distance toward another: the capitalist oligarchies, like Brazil, Mexico, and Russia, with their much greater concentration of economic bounty. ... America’s runaway rewards for the affluent have not unleashed an economic miracle whose rewards have generously filtered down to the poor and middle class.”²¹⁸

If the media’s ‘lizard brains’ were simply attracted to crisis, then why not probe into critiques like this one about the direction our society has traveled in the past four decades? The lead writes itself: *The U.S. is becoming more like the capitalist oligarchies of Brazil, Mexico, and Russia.* This is a real crisis rather than a manufactured one based on disinformation.

In 2019, the FAIR group (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) “analyzed the 50 most recent articles using the search term ‘oligarchs’ from the *New York Times*, CNN, and Fox News websites” [150 total articles].²¹⁹ FAIR found that “[in] all, 98% of countries referenced in connection to oligarchs were

²¹⁸ Hacker, J. S., & Pierson, P. (2010). *Winner-take-all politics: How Washington made the rich richer--and turned its back on the middle class*. Simon and Schuster.

²¹⁹ MacLeod, A. (2019, September 17). *Russia has ‘oligarchs,’ the US Has ‘businessmen.’* FAIR. <https://fair.org/home/russia-has-oligarchs-the-us-has-businessmen/>

either Russia or formerly Soviet-dominated states.”²²⁰ Conversely, U.S. billionaire plutocrats, like the Kochs and Walton family (who do so much to influence public policy) were typically referred to as ‘businessmen’ and ‘philanthropists’ “engaged in normal economic activity or else looking out for the betterment of humanity.”²²¹ It’s Russian oligarchs, not our own, that “are nefariously dominating politics.”²²² FAIR concludes the article by noting that “when a politician like Bernie Sanders suggests that [U.S.] oligarchs influence the media, senior editors react angrily, claiming he is ‘ridiculous’ and a ‘conspiracy theorist’.”²²³ Even though Sanders’s view is corroborated in academic critiques, it’s dismissed outright in the mainstream media. Should the senior editors’ actions be called deliberate or unintended *elite activism*?

“What America leads in:

#1: Covid-19 cases

#1: Medical debt

#1: Prescription drug prices

#1: Deaths from lack of insurance

#1: Student debt

#1: Prisoners

#1: Gun violence

#1: Military spending

#1: Trade deficit

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

#1: Billionaires

We need to change our national priorities.”²²⁴

Senator Bernie Sanders

If mainstream news outlets were more critical of state-corporate power in the U.S. then the public might hear more reports like the Yale University study from 2020 explaining that “health care expenditure per capita is higher in the USA than in any other country [and that] more than 37 million Americans do not have health insurance, and 41 million more have inadequate access to care.”²²⁵ Furthermore, the lead author of the study, Dr. Alison Galvani, explained on the independent news outlet, *Democracy Now!*, that instituting the single-payer plan “Medicare for All would save over \$450 billion compared to what the country is paying now” and, on top of that, it would save over 68,000 lives per year (and “that is a very conservative estimate”).²²⁶ *68,000 lives per year!* Here’s an unamplified, real, and uniquely American crisis compared to the rest of the industrial world. If our mainstream news media were true to the vision of the Fourth Estate, this information would be pitched to the public regularly in defense of the Common Good.

²²⁴ Sanders, B. [@BernieSanders]. (2020, November 1). What America leads in. Twitter.

https://twitter.com/search?q=bernie%20sanders%20covid%20america%20leads%20in&src=typed_query

²²⁵ Galvani, A. P., Parpia, A. S., Foster, E. M., Singer, B. H., & Fitzpatrick, M. C. (2020). Improving the prognosis of health care in the USA. *The Lancet*, 395(10223), 524-533.

²²⁶ Democracy Now! (2020, February 19). *Yale study says medicare for all would save U.S. \$450 billion, prevent nearly 70,000 deaths a year*. https://www.democracynow.org/2020/2/19/lancet_report_medicare_for_all

“The only developed outliers [without universal healthcare] are a few still-troubled Balkan states, the Soviet-style autocracy of Belarus, and the U.S. ofA., the richest nation in the world.”²²⁷

Max Fisher, *The Atlantic*

If mainstream news outlets are attracted to crisis, then, again, why aren't these facts widely disseminated to the public? It appears they're mostly ignored by these outlets or worse—trivialized through propagandistic framing. One only needs to examine the reporting from the corporate news media during the 2019 - 2020 Democratic Presidential primaries to identify their bias against the vast majority's interests on the topic of healthcare (see the article by FAIR: “Corporate Media Are Here to Warn You: Medicare for All Is a Very Bad Idea”²²⁸).

“The U.S. likes to see itself on par with other high-income countries... The truth is, it's a real outlier.”²²⁹

John Cylus

There are countless systemic effects that ripple throughout our society due to our dysfunctional healthcare system, including medical bankruptcy. For example, a 2019 study in the *American Journal of Public Health* estimated that despite the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010 our

²²⁷ Fisher, M. (2012, June 29). *Here's a map of the countries that provide universal health care (America's still not on it)*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/06/heres-a-map-of-the-countries-that-provide-universal-health-care-americas-till-not-on-it/259153/>

²²⁸ MacLeod, A. (2019b, December 20). *Corporate media are here to warn you: Medicare for all Is a very bad idea*. FAIR. <https://fair.org/home/corporate-media-are-here-to-warn-you-medicare-for-all-is-a-very-bad-idea/>

²²⁹ Levey, N. N. (2019, September 17). Americans' struggles with medical bills are a foreign concept in other countries. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2019-09-11/american-struggle-insurance-deductibles-unique>

country still sees “about 530,000 medical bankruptcies annually.”²³⁰ 530,000! Do medical bankruptcies even exist in other rich industrialized countries with universal healthcare?²³¹

On the PBS series, “Sick Around the World,” a *Frontline* reporter asked Pascal Couchepin, the former President of Switzerland: “How many people in Switzerland go bankrupt because of medical bills?” Couchepin responded: “Nobody. Doesn’t happen. It would be a huge scandal if it happens.”²³²

What type of political system would favor the most expensive healthcare system in the world to one that could be billions of dollars cheaper and save more than 68,000 lives per year, conservatively? What type of politics favors a healthcare system that produces half a million medical bankruptcies per year when this phenomenon might not even exist in other industrialized societies? Doubtless, it’s a politics that favors “pharmaceutical giants, for-profit insurance firms, and [the wealth of] medical professionals”²³³ over the population. That’s an example of our nation’s perverse exceptionalism.

In the book *The Measure of a Nation* from 2012, Howard Steven Friedman, a statistician, developed a rigorous criteria for comparing the U.S. to other rich nations and selected fourteen of them in his analysis. On the topic of health, Friedman states that “[the] data leave no room for doubt. America’s healthcare ranking is sick. We have the lowest life expectancy in our group of competitor nations

²³⁰ Himmelstein, D. U., Lawless, R. M., Thorne, D., Foohey, P., & Woolhandler, S. (2019). Medical bankruptcy: still common despite the Affordable Care Act. *AJPH Law & Ethics* (109), 3.

²³¹ Eliasson, L. (2010). *America’s perceptions of Europe*. Springer.

²³² Frontline: Sick Around the World. (2007, October 30). *Interviews: Pascal Couchepin*. PBS. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/sickaroundtheworld/interviews/couchepin.html>

²³³ Friedman, H. S. (2012). *The Measure of a Nation: How to Regain America’s Competitive Edge and Boost Our Global Standing*. Prometheus Books.

despite spending nearly twice as much, and for some countries up to four times more, on healthcare per person—an extremely poor return on investment. Our population has the highest rate of infant and maternal mortality. A large percentage of our population lacks insurance or access to adequate healthcare. The system is riddled with inequities of race, gender, and socioeconomic condition.”²³⁴

How often do the mainstream media hold our political system to account for such dismal outcomes?

How often do they point out how much better other rich nations do on outcomes like life expectancy, infant and maternal mortality, and access to healthcare?

“Infant and maternal mortality in the United States is little better than in some developing countries; for infant mortality, it is worse than Cuba, Belarus, and Malaysia, to name a few.”²³⁵

Joseph Stiglitz

What is our political system’s historical record on improving general societal well-being in terms of economic security? The Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality tells us that, since the 1980s, “wage inequality in the United States has increased substantially, with the overall level of inequality now approaching the extreme level that prevailed prior to the Great Depression.”²³⁶

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Stiglitz, J. E. (2012). *The price of inequality: How today's divided society endangers our future*. WW Norton & Company.

²³⁶ Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality. (2011). 20 facts about U.S. inequality that everyone should know. *Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality*. <https://inequality.stanford.edu/publications/20-facts-about-us-inequality-everyone-should-know>

How well has the media brought this ‘milestone’ to light? Have they ever explained that, unlike during the era of the New Deal, the federal government now has a different approach to solving poverty and economic distress and that approach emphasizes the imposition of “cures” on schools to hold them more accountable?

I’ll never forget when I first came across the social epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett and learned that the gap between the richest 20 percent and poorest 20 percent in the U.S. is one of the worst in the industrialized world (our nation ranks 22nd out of 23 on that measure, between Portugal and Singapore).²³⁷ More provocatively still, I’ll never forget when I learned from these scholar-activists that higher degrees of inequality within societies is related to worse outcomes in a wide variety of areas such as life expectancy, infant mortality (the U.S. ranked 33rd out of 36 countries²³⁸), mental illness, social mobility, child well-being, teenage pregnancies, homicides, incarceration rates, and even academic achievement.²³⁹

As one of the most unequal societies in the industrialized world the United States fares poorly on all of these outcomes compared to other wealthy nations. These social epidemiologists’ research (see *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*) presents some of the most glaring examples of our nation’s perverse exceptionalism. But has the media turned a spotlight on these deep and systemic crises related to income inequality in the interests of the Common Good? If income

²³⁷ Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2010). *The spirit level. Why equality makes societies stronger*. Bloomsbury Press.

²³⁸ United Health Foundation. (2021). International comparison. *America’s Health Ranking*.

<https://www.americashealthrankings.org/learn/reports/2018-annual-report/findings-international-comparison>

²³⁹ Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2010). *The spirit level. Why equality makes societies stronger*. Bloomsbury Press.

inequality is related to inequality in academic achievement, then why hasn't the media asked the public to consider what happens when inequality approaches "the extreme level" witnessed during the Great Depression?

Along with Friedman's book, Wilkinson and Pickett's *The Spirit Level* is essential to grappling with the shocking degree of America's perverse exceptionalism.

On income, Friedman explains how the U.S. compares to other industrialized countries in terms of *unadjusted* income (i.e., before taxes) and *adjusted* income (i.e., after taxes and transfers) since both measures matter. Friedman writes:

"Looking at the distribution of income, we see first that wealthy Americans have a far higher share of the total unadjusted income than the wealthy in other countries, a trend that has been increasing rapidly since the 1980s. ... Secondly, inequality in adjusted income... is also far higher in the United States than in other countries and has increased more rapidly than nearly all of [them]. ... Third, at the same time, the earnings of the American working poor are comparatively lower than those of other countries."²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ Friedman, H. S. (2012). *The Measure of a Nation: How to Regain America's Competitive Edge and Boost Our Global Standing*. Prometheus Books.

Why don't the media wave facts like these in front of the American public routinely until the public demands better representation from their elected officials? Where's the journalistic notion of *comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable*?

What does it mean when family income and income inequality within a society are related to student achievement rates? That's a question never pursued within our society outside academia and independent media.

It's interesting that mainstream news outlets do such a poor job at explaining how badly the U.S. fares on international indices and yet so often echo the crisis rhetoric against America's schools. That rhetoric includes echoing disinformation about the main factors influencing student achievement on standardized tests. Specifically, the media ignore outside-of-school factors (OSFs) like poverty and how they affect standardized test scores far more than school-based factors. Further, the media tend to neglect that the average scores in the U.S. on international tests appear low because the U.S. has a higher level of income inequality among most of the tested nations and a higher percentage of students living in poverty. The test scores of disadvantaged students predictably, unsurprisingly bring down the nation's overall average.

“...according to the National Center for Children in Poverty, 45 percent of American children live in low-income households and more than half of public school students qualify for lunch subsidies.”²⁴¹

Daniel A. Domenech

According to Peter Temin, an economist at M.I.T., there’s a neglected connection between America’s shrinking middle-class—a decades-long trend—and the global financial crisis of 2008. He tells us that “[the] middle class’s share of total income fell 30 percent in forty-four years.”²⁴² Further, Temin says that, “The decline in the growth of workers’ compensation has been cited as a cause of the 2008 financial crisis as workers borrowed on the security of their houses to sustain their rising consumption that rising incomes had supported before 1980.”²⁴³

Corporate news outlets had an excellent opportunity to teach the public about the state of general societal well-being in the U.S. when Professor Philip Alston, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, toured the U.S. for two weeks in 2017. His statement at the end of that year provided references and insights into societal crises that might have been amplified in the media like their amplification of the ideologically-driven “educational crisis.” For example, on the topic of inequality, Alston references the most recent *World Inequality Report* to tell us that “in both Europe and the US the top 1% of adults earned around 10% of national income in 1980. In Europe that has risen today to 12%, but in the US it has reached 20%. In the same time period in the US

²⁴¹ Domenech, D.A. (2016, May). Our country’s confounding chasm. *School Administrator*, 73 (5). DOI: file:///home/chronos/u-36cd2dc5e3f065a456a4b38080782ca5e7063adf/MyFiles/Downloads/Our_countrys_confounding_chasm.pdf

²⁴² Temin, P. (2017). *The vanishing middle class. Prejudice and Power in a Dual Economy*. MIT Press.

²⁴³ Ibid.

annual income earnings for the top 1% have risen by 205%, while for the top 0.001% the figure is 636%. By comparison, the average annual wage of the bottom 50% has stagnated since 1980.”²⁴⁴ That’s the effect of neoliberal, Richistan economics—promoted in the 1980s as a way to help all Americans.

“The growth of media conglomerates in the U.S. since the 1980s has been accompanied by massive cuts in the budgets for investigative journalism.”²⁴⁵

To put Richistan economics another way, “this boomtime at the very top has not benefited the rest of the American population in any measurable way.”²⁴⁶ Some economists call this period “a second Gilded Age.”²⁴⁷ If our society cultivated a stronger policy literacy, it would be clear that the first Gilded Age (1870s - 1920s) and the present one were not inevitable due to ‘natural’ market forces or the results of “failing” schools, but largely the result of policy agendas by a two-party duopoly prioritizing business interests over the interests of the population.

Alston also directs our attention to the *World Income Inequality Database*, which shows that “the US has the highest Gini rate [another measurement of inequality] of all Western Countries.”²⁴⁸ Another

²⁴⁴ Alston, P. (2017, December 15). Statement on visit to the USA, by professor Philip Alston, United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights. *United Nations Human Rights*.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22533>

²⁴⁵ Wikipedia contributors. (2021a, February 18). Early 1980s recession. *Wikipedia*.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_1980s_recession#:~:text=The%20early%201980s%20recession%20in,began%20to%20afflict%20the%20economy.

²⁴⁶ Zucman, G., Piketty, T., & Saez, E. (2018, February 9). Inequality is not inevitable – but the US “experiment” is a recipe for divergence. *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/dec/14/inequality-is-not-inevitable-but-the-us-experiment-is-a-recipe-for-divergence>

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Alston, P. (2017, December 15). Statement on visit to the USA, by professor Philip Alston, United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights. *United Nations Human Rights*.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22533>

neglected example of our nation's perverse exceptionalism. How often is the term *Gini rate* or *Gini coefficient* even mentioned in the mainstream media? Esoteric terms are not necessarily inaccessible to the public; it all depends on journalistic ingenuity—the ability to turn what's strange, incoherent, or even boring into compelling narratives. Elites do it through crisis rhetoric, but surely there are other ways to alert the public to real crises neglected by state-corporate power.

Another aspect of general societal well-being is reflected in rates of social mobility in a society (i.e., movement up or down the economic ladder). The sociologist Alyn McCarty tells us “[rates] of social mobility are lower in the United States than most continental European countries and have remained unchanged since 1979.”²⁴⁹ On this topic, one of Alston's conclusions is that “the American Dream is rapidly becoming the American Illusion as the US... now has the lowest rate of social mobility of any of the rich countries.”²⁵⁰

In 2020, the World Economic Forum (WEF) reported on the Global Social Mobility Index, which ranked the Nordic countries (i.e., Denmark, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Iceland) in the top 5 spots while the U.S. ranked at 27th (between Lithuania and Spain) on that outcome.²⁵¹

How often do mainstream news outlets offer intelligent commentary about why Nordic countries do so well on this index as with so many other international indices? Is it the smaller gap in income

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Hutt, R. (2020, January 20). Denmark is the world's most socially mobile country. *World Economic Forum*. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/these-are-the-10-countries-with-the-best-social-mobility/>

inequality compared to other nations, as Wilkinson and Pickett would stress? Is it low rates of child poverty? Is it free healthcare? Is it a labor market that supports livable wages? Free higher education? Is it due to much higher rates of unionization? Is it a synergy of such factors? What policies make the most difference? It's baffling that disseminating the answers to these questions is not treated as fundamental to the role of the news media—as one of its highest priorities. Their behavior only makes sense if the corporate media are protectors of elite interests rather than the Common Good.

I've noticed that without this policy literacy people often mistakenly believe that a country's homogeneity (which, in this case, might be code for 'whiteness') is the decisive factor, as if egalitarian-oriented policies, like universal healthcare, only work if cultural or ethnic diversity isn't an obstacle. (How does diversity obstruct universal healthcare? Isn't the truth that elites exploit racial or ethnic differences to avoid egalitarian policies?) I've even heard liberals default to this homogeneity argument. But one never hears that argument made about the world's least culturally diverse countries, including Argentina, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay.²⁵² Further, this knee-jerk response unambiguously blames America's black and brown populations for our society's problems rather than America's elite-driven "slide toward economic oligarchy."²⁵³ Another example of inadvertent elite activism.

²⁵² Morin, R. (2014, February 7). *The most (and least) culturally diverse countries in the world*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/07/18/the-most-and-least-culturally-diverse-countries-in-the-world/>

²⁵³ Hacker, J. S., & Pierson, P. (2010). *Winner-take-all politics: How Washington made the rich richer--and turned its back on the middle class*. Simon and Schuster.

One of the most important economic issues related to student achievement in schools must be the risks associated with child poverty. How well has our political system ameliorated child poverty in the United States in the past four decades? According to *Child Trends*, child poverty rates have actually changed very little in the U.S. since the 1980s.²⁵⁴ However, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the U.S. still has one of the highest rates of child poverty (21.2%) in the industrialized world, ranking 31st among 35 member nations—between Mexico (19.8) and Chile (21.5).²⁵⁵ Alston echoed this record. He stated to the United Nations that “[a] shockingly high number of children in the US live in poverty. In 2016, 18% of children—some 13.3 million—were living in poverty, with children comprising 32.6% of all people in poverty.”²⁵⁶

The Special Rapporteur also tells us: “The Stanford Center on Inequality and Poverty ranks the most well-off countries in terms of labor markets, poverty, safety net, wealth inequality, and economic mobility. The US comes in last of the top 10 most well-off countries, and 18th amongst the top 21.”²⁵⁷

Doesn’t that sound like a list of issues that mainstream news outlets routinely avoid? I suspect that’s because they’re corporate entities and don’t function in the tradition of the Fourth Estate.

²⁵⁴ Child Trends. (2021b, February 10). *Children in poverty*.

<https://www.childtrends.org/indicators/children-in-poverty#:~:text=Child%20poverty%20has%20generally%20decreased,risen%20during%20the%20Great%20Recession.>

²⁵⁵ Statista. (2021, March 12). *Child poverty in OECD countries 2018*.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/264424/child-poverty-in-oecd-countries/>

²⁵⁶ Alston, P. (2017, December 15). *Statement on visit to the USA, by professor Philip Alston, United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights*. United Nations Human Rights.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22533>

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

The French economist Thomas Piketty and the other authors of the *World Inequality Report* tell us that, “The US has run a unique experiment since the 1980s—and the results have been uniquely disastrous. Bad policy can have a real impact on millions of lives, for decades.”²⁵⁸ If one looks at Piketty’s international bestseller, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* from 2014, there is no greater, steadier climb in income inequality among the top 10 percent of U.S. earners in the past 100 years than its upswing from the 1980s on. It’s an indictment of our present political-economic system in a single graph. It also prompts us to think about the connection between the economic shifts that took place in the 1980s and the fact that the most influential catalyst of the crisis rhetoric against schools came out in the same period.

The French economist Gabriel Zucman tells us that by 2016 the top 10 percent of earners owned 77 percent of total wealth in the United States; compared to 47 percent in the United Kingdom, 50 percent in Norway and France, and 45 percent in Finland and Australia.²⁵⁹ Further, the top 1 percent in the U.S. owned 42 percent of total wealth; compared to 18 percent in the United Kingdom, Norway, and France, 13 percent in Australia, and 12 percent in Finland.²⁶⁰ Those are more examples of the results of Richistan economics—worst in the U.S. than other rich nations.

²⁵⁸ Zucman, G., Piketty, T., & Saez, E. (2018, February 9). Inequality is not inevitable – but the US “experiment” is a recipe for divergence. *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/dec/14/inequality-is-not-inevitable-but-the-us-experiment-is-a-recipe-for-divergence>

²⁵⁹ Zucman, G. (2016). *Wealth inequality*. Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality.

<https://inequality.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Pathways-SOTU-2016-Wealth-Inequality-3.pdf>

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

If family income is an extremely reliable predictor of scores on every major standardized test, then what does one expect to happen to test scores in an economic system designed to benefit the rich at the expense of the vast majority?

As a teacher it's frustrating to hear the endless cultural mantras about "failing" schools based on international student achievement tests while never hearing compelling discussions about which political systems are better serving their populations through egalitarian-oriented policies. Which are getting better results on social and economic indices? Which are enhancing human flourishing on a broader scale? Which systems deserve emulation? Is anyone curious if student achievement is related to systems that promote higher levels of well-being and economic security?

Personally, I didn't realize how different news programs could be until I reached beyond the mainstream corporate outlets and started to discover the real Fourth Estate of independent, adversarial journalism. It wasn't until that discovery that I started to read news like following from *Common*

Dreams:

"...the Federal Reserve reports that millions of Americans continue to struggle. 30 percent of adults, roughly 73 million people, are finding it difficult to make ends meet or are barely getting by. Just under one fourth of all adults said they could not pay all their bills for the current month. 44 percent said

they could not cover an emergency expense of \$400, and one fourth of all adults reported that they had to forgo medical treatment during the past year because of the cost.”²⁶¹

These are shocking statistics from the richest nation on Earth. I believe the mainstream media routinely ignore such shocking numbers and the failures of our political system to serve their citizens. Why that is the case is a question every citizen should explore.

“Corporations, long identified as our principal economic actors, are now also our principal political actors. The result is a combined economic and political system—the operating system upon which our society runs—of great power and voraciousness, pursuing its own economic interests without serious concern for the values of fairness, justice, or sustainability that democratic government might have provided.”²⁶²

J.G. Speth at Alternet.org

In my opinion, one of the main conclusions to draw from the past four decades in the U.S. is that elites have disguised Richistan economic policies benefiting the top 1 percent as policies meant to benefit the society as a whole. That’s one way elites have sold this ideology: Anti-egalitarianism masked as egalitarian or natural “free-market” processes.

²⁶¹ Eskow, R., & Eskow, R. (2017, November 13). *Why we need to confront the billionaires’ paradise*. Common Dreams. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2017/11/13/why-we-need-confront-billionaires-paradise>

²⁶² Speth, J. G. (2021, February 9). *America Is the best country in the world at being last*. Alternet.Org. <https://www.alternet.org/2015/01/america-best-country-world-being-last/>

I was struck by the UN Special Rapporteur mentioning that “American exceptionalism was a constant theme in [his] conversations”²⁶³ while touring the United States in 2017. “But instead of realizing its founders’ admirable commitments,” he tells us, “today’s United States has proved itself to be exceptional in far more problematic ways that are shockingly at odds with its immense wealth and its founding commitment to human rights.”²⁶⁴ (Let’s not forget the Founders’ notion of human rights excluded more humans than it included, but still, Alston’s overall point is worth contemplating.)

In 2020, Robert Reich, the scholar-activist and economist, remarked on America’s true exceptionalism as well during the Coronavirus economic recession. In a video titled “America Is Not Exceptional” on Reich’s YouTube channel, the economist tells us:

“...the problems at the core of our broken system laid bare by this pandemic have been plaguing this country long before Trump came along. America is the only industrialized nation without guaranteed universal healthcare. No other industrialized nation insists on tying healthcare to employment, resulting in tens of millions of U.S. citizens losing their health insurance at the very moment when they need it most. We’re the only one of 22 advanced nations that doesn’t give all workers some form of paid sick leave. Average wage growth in the U.S. has long lagged behind average wage growth in most other industrialized countries even before the pandemic robbed Americans of their jobs and incomes. Since the year 2000, American workers’ share of total national income has dropped more than in any

²⁶³ Alston, P. (2017, December 15). *Statement on visit to the USA, by professor Philip Alston, United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights*. United Nations Human Rights.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22533>

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

other rich nation. And America also has the largest gap between CEO pay and the average worker. In 1965, American CEOs were paid 20 times the typical worker. Today, American CEOs are paid 278 times the typical worker. Not surprisingly, American workers are far less unionized than workers in other industrialized economies. Only 10.2 percent of all workers in America belong to a union compared with more than 26 percent in Canada, 65 percent in Sweden, and 23 percent in Britain. With less unionization, American workers are easily overpowered by corporations and they can't bargain for higher wages or better benefits. So who and what's to blame for the largest preventable loss of life in American history [due to COVID-19]? It's not just Trump's malicious incompetence. It's decades of America's failure to provide its people with the basic supports they need. Decades of putting corporations' bottom lines over workers' paychecks. Decades of letting the rich and powerful pull the strings as the rest of us barely get by. This pandemic has exposed what has long been true. On the global stage, America is the exception, but not in the way we'd like to believe."²⁶⁵

On his *Facebook* account, Reich added these thoughts to the topic: "What American exceptionalism really means: 1,000+ police killings every year, no paid sick leave, no universal healthcare, largest prison population, most COVID deaths, most gun deaths, most student loan debt, highest drug prices, largest military spending, largest CEO-to-worker pay gap."²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Robert Reich. (2020, June 23). *America is not exceptional*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOUryJO8y_w

²⁶⁶ Reich, R. (2020, June 22). In *Facebook* [What American exceptionalism really means]. https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=565863944113077&id=142474049098533

In this study when I refer to America's perverse exceptionalism it's to our outlier status on so many international comparisons, such as healthcare, income inequality, poverty, infant mortality, social mobility, and child well-being.



Perverse Olympics 1 (Child Poverty Rate), 2021

Lowest Rates: 1) Finland, 2) Denmark, 3) Iceland

...

30) Mexico, 31) United States, 32) Chile

Essay 8: No Accountability for the Accountabilists

“The [private] foundations demand that public schools and teachers be held accountable for performance, but they themselves are accountable to no one. If their plans fail, no sanctions are levied against them. They are bastions of unaccountability.”²⁶⁷

Diane Ravitch

In order to intercede, to intervene against this duplicitous orthodoxy I think it’s necessary to understand what *ANAR* (such a neglected topic in schools of education) reveals about us, the body politic—what influences us, captures our imagination, manipulates our acquiescence towards adverse policies and oppressive conditions. As a collective entity, what are our vulnerabilities?

In the realm of educational reforms it seems one of our weaknesses is that, as a collective, the body politic is so often *unmoved* by intercessions against the duplicity of state power. That’s because crisis narratives against schools have been challenged and even exposed as shams, but these critiques never find traction in the culture—at least not to the point of altering ‘the permanent way’. For example, numerous critiques have come out since the 1980s that have debunked *ANAR*’s analysis; exposing it as an ideological or propagandistic triumph rather than one of intellectual integrity in service to the public’s interest. But then, these critiques never seem to raise public consciousness in the way that’s

²⁶⁷ Ravitch, D. (2016). *The death and life of the great American school system: How testing and choice are undermining education*. Basic Books.

needed to mobilize enough resistance in schools or the larger culture against top-down reforms. In fact, if anything, *ANAR*, the catalyst of ‘the permanent way’, seems to be a moot point for most educators and a non-issue for the public rather than a critical lesson as to why things are the way they are. Doubtless, the lack of public resonance for these critiques is partly due to academia’s failure to disseminate critical knowledge to the body politic; to take on the media’s abandoned role as the Fourth Estate. Part of our weakness is due to *unknown knowns* kept or languishing inside academia.

Thus, academia does, in fact, act like the Fourth Estate in terms of *producing* critical knowledge about the abuses of state power—so needed to bend the arc of moral society toward justice and democracy²⁶⁸—and yet, most of these critiques just seem to amount to conversations in “quiet rooms”²⁶⁹ (to borrow the infamous phrase from Mitt Romney, the former U.S. presidential candidate). *The quiet rooms of paywalled databases, classrooms, and conferences where non-intervening interventions are circulated.*

However, some scholar-activists have successfully reached beyond those “quiet rooms.” For example, there’s the tireless challenges to the status quo from critical thinkers like David Berliner, the late Gerald Bracey, and, more recently, Diane Ravitch through popular books and talks on YouTube. And yet, these voices are still *not enough* to reach that critical threshold needed for moving thought in the body politic in new directions. These public intellectuals remain exemplars for recreating the Fourth Estate

²⁶⁸ Wikipedia contributors. (2021a, January 20). *Theodore Parker*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_Parker

²⁶⁹ Amira, D. (2012, January 11). *Mitt Romney says we must only speak of income inequality in ‘quiet rooms.’* *Intelligencer*. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2012/01/romney-quiet-rooms.html>

in two vital ways: 1) producing or translating critical knowledge *and* 2) disseminating it to the public. On the whole, academia excels at the first and generally disregards the second.

What about the reach of scholars in the mainstream media? Over time, critiques do trickle into the largest media outlets, but never enough to energize the public like the educational specter itself via the same media. For example, James Guthrie, a professor in education, told National Public Radio (NPR) as recently as 2018 that the authors of *ANAR* “were hell-bent on proving that schools were bad. They cooked the books to get what they wanted.”²⁷⁰

It’s so refreshing when scholars are blunt rather than mired in tentativeness, but it’s a shame when it takes decades for that boldness to come out. In the same program, two *ANAR* authors (the authors themselves!) told NPR “that they never set out to undertake an objective inquiry into the state of the nation’s schools. They started out already alarmed by what they believed was a decline in education, and looked for facts to fit that narrative.”²⁷¹

That’s a journalistic scoop, right? In the right context it would be, but NPR didn’t entertain the full implications of the authors’ confessional explanation. In the right context, this acknowledgment about the *shock doctrine* should shock us as a society because the 1980’s catalyst dramatically changed education in America’s schools for decades! It has affected the lives of tens of millions of students each

²⁷⁰ Kamenetz, A. (2018, April 29). *What “a nation at risk” got wrong, and right, about U.S. schools*. NPR.Org. <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/04/29/604986823/what-a-nation-at-risk-got-wrong-and-right-about-u-s-schools>

²⁷¹ Ibid.

year. It might be impossible at this point to know how different the educational landscape would look if *ANAR* never shaped the educational zeitgeist at the perfect moment as our society shifted from Broadland to Richistan economics.

Doubtless, the *ANAR* authors' honesty is refreshing too (if they admitted their actions in the way NPR described it). Perhaps it's easier to open up about elite activism or collaborating with political power thirty-five years after the fact. Perhaps the authors *believed* things were bad in schools before examining the evidence because the specter of crisis has been employed against America's schools for more than a century—it's a default cultural assumption, the conventional wisdom, the hegemonic common sense.²⁷² Their own indoctrination led them to further ours for decades in untold ways.

How ironic is it that a federal report denouncing mediocrity and the loss of high standards in education didn't even bother to collect evidence in the most basic of scientific ways? Could Gallup get away with doing the same thing? Could the pollsters believe in certain positions from the outset and then find 'facts to fit that narrative'?

I believe the implications of the NPR interview need to be explored to fathom the scope of our collective vulnerability. While it's not shocking that state power "cooked the books" to serve ideological ends (it brings to mind just about every American war campaign), it's still shocking to me that we live in a society where its exposure doesn't lead to the slightest of consequences. Doesn't that

²⁷² Bracey, G. W. (2009). *Education hell: Rhetoric vs. reality* (1st Edition). Editorial Projects in Education.

Rothstein, R. (1998). *The way we were?: The myths and realities of America's student achievement*. Brookings Inst Press.

speaking volumes about the state of things—the strength of the status quo? Or the power of the actors who maintain it?

For starters, our subordination to political power is taken as such a given that elites can champion notions of accountability knowing that if their manipulations are exposed at some point it's unlikely they will be held accountable for those actions. That's Orwellian. They can *demand* accountability from others—even posing as virtuous civil rights advocates, the accountabilists—and then if their own claims are discovered to be erroneous or fraudulent, if their solutions are found to be disastrous for schools, then *nothing*? No repercussions at all? No public reckoning? No debate about it? No learning from it?

Doubtless, *hypo*-accountability for elites only incentivizes more *cooking of the books* in the future; bringing disinformation rather than knowledge to bear on society's great challenges, as a default elite strategy. Doubtless, our silence (our 'neutrality') plays a part in strengthening this self-generating system.

No accountability for the accountabilists also means the endless recycling of the educational specter remains intact—to be summoned again when needed (for instance, after NCLB's "toxic brand"²⁷³ has faded enough from memory). It means there's no re-evaluation of reform policies influenced by *ANAR*'s alarmist manipulation. Thus, no re-evaluation of the status quo, the long succession of

²⁷³ Spellings, M., & Wertheimer, L. (2010, March 17). *Spellings: "no child left behind" is a "toxic brand."* NPR. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124758597>

top-down solutions laid out by elites for K-12 reforms. Apart from stories here and there in the mainstream media, there's not many signs of collective learning in our culture about how to prevent the public from being manipulated time and again on the topic of educational reforms.

There's also no emphatic commitment from schools of education to understand the complex lessons to be learned from *ANAR* for the sake of resisting similar abuses of state power in the future. It appears the public has become acclimated to living in a post-truth society and this type of abuse is just par for the course. Passivity reigns towards what's happened and what is happening in our society on educational issues. Hence, the relevance of Zinn's invocation to *not be neutral on a moving train*. The reform 'train' has been moving in disturbing directions for decades and nothing seems to stop it; not even decades of research contradicting the claims of its proponents or the exposure of the damaging to disastrous effects of imposed solutions on students, teachers, and schools.

I've mentioned the critiques that have come out debunking *ANAR*. Before venturing further let's explore a few; the ones I would point out first to educators who, I believe, should be leaving schools of education knowing this critical part in the history of reforms. Here's a snippet from the late Gerald Bracey, one of the most astute critical thinkers and scholar-activists in the field of education, demonstrating how elites get the facts to fit the narrative:

“After the opening rhetorical flourishes, *ANAR* listed 13 indicators of how and why we were at risk. All involved test scores, and many were suspect. For instance, ‘There was a steady decline in science

achievement scores of U.S. 17-year olds as measured by national assessments of science in 1969, 1973 and 1977'... One of the 'principles of data interpretation' that are the organizers of *Reading Educational Research: How to Avoid Getting Statistically Snookered* is 'watch for selectivity in the data'... The [ANAR] commission's statement above applies only to 17-year-olds and only to science. A skeptic might wonder why they picked only on science and why they picked only on 17-year-olds. An answer might be this: you don't see that steady decline in science for 9- and 13-year-olds, the other two ages tested. Nor is there any hint of a decline for any of the three ages in reading or math. Thus the commission had nine trend lines—three ages by three subjects—only one of which could be used to support crisis rhetoric. And that was the only one used."²⁷⁴

I consider Bracey one of the unsung heroes in education who fought relentlessly against the school reform orthodoxy. If graduate schools of education handed out a George Orwell-type of award for exposing doublespeak and other bullshit in the realm of education it should be named after Bracey.

Bracey's insight shows us how data can be manipulated in order to train the body politic how to think obediently about schools, which is through elite-friendly narratives. When the powerful can disseminate compelling metaphors (e.g., invoking crisis, war, nationalism, and threats to future prosperity) and misleading statistics to the masses—which is then amplified by an uncritical mainstream media—so much can be accomplished in terms of generating passivity towards elite

²⁷⁴ Bracey, G. W. (2009). *Education hell: Rhetoric vs. reality* (1st Edition). Editorial Projects in Education.

agendas. How do we start to counter our vulnerabilities to such narratives? Do we abandon mainstream media news outlets since they are a crucial component in this self-generating system?

In 1995, David Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle published a rigorous response to *ANAR*, the best-seller *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools*. I see this rebuttal and critical *intervening* as the opposite of *ANAR* in so many ways. For example, *Manufactured Crisis* was about 400 pages long while *ANAR* was about 40; the former is filled with footnotes and citations while the latter provided no meaningful references for its data; the former supported its argument with an exhaustive collection of evidence, the latter with rhetoric and misrepresentations; and the former is an example of heterodox critique against state-corporate power while the latter turned into a miraculous gift for elite propaganda. Aren't these differences revealing? It makes me think about how *little* state power needs to move the body politic in certain directions while those who intervene against that power need *so much* (e.g., evidence, facts, data) to counter it—and still the 'train' moves on. Why it still *moves on* is a critical question that schools of education should be grappling on a regular basis.

Berliner and Biddle exposed the fraudulent nature of the crisis rhetoric in so many ways, including bringing to light the federal government's own inadvertent rebuttal against that rhetoric, the Sandia Report from 1990, which appears to have been commissioned to revive the Reagan-era crisis mentality sparked by *ANAR* but this time for the first Bush administration (to coincide with Bush's 1989 Education Summit).

However, the report was conducted by engineers at the Sandia National Laboratories (SNL) in New Mexico under the direction of the U.S. Department of Energy, not the Department of Education; a group trained in national security issues (“We apply science to help detect, repel, defeat, or mitigate threats”²⁷⁵). Perhaps those immersed in national security issues seemed—to the ideologues—to be the appropriate group to author the report given *ANAR*’s message framing failing schools as existential threats to the nation and America’s economy. Perhaps at that point they had total faith in the narrative’s truth. SNL’s 176-page analysis, far more comprehensive than *ANAR*, focused on “drop-out rates, high school completion rates, SAT trends, NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] trends, and international comparisons.”²⁷⁶

But elites hit a snag in their crisis revival, the summoning of that dependable specter—a seemingly rare mishap. The Department of Energy forgot to tell the Sandia engineers to get the facts to fit the crisis narrative. The SNL authors of the report concluded that “[to] our surprise, on nearly every measure, we found steady or slightly improving [educational] trends.”²⁷⁷ The cognitive dissonance of it: *Steady or slightly improving* meets *threatens our very future as a Nation and a people*. And they were surprised. They expected the data to confirm our collective bias against schools.

²⁷⁵ Sandia National Laboratories. (2021). *About Sandia*. <https://www.sandia.gov/about/index.html>

²⁷⁶ Owings, W., Kaplan, L., & Kaplan, L. S. (Eds.). (2003). *Best practices, best thinking, and emerging issues in school leadership*. Corwin Press.

²⁷⁷ Ansary, T. (2007, March 9). *Education at risk: Fallout from a flawed report*. Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/landmark-education-report-nation-risk>

In an article for *Edutopia*, Tamim Ansary, an Afghan-American author, explains how the Sandia Report exposed a major aspect of *ANAR*'s misrepresentation of the facts to the public in the following excerpt:

“One section [of the Sandia Report]... analyzed SAT scores between the late 1970s and 1990, a period when those scores slipped markedly. (‘A Nation at Risk’ spotlighted the decline of scores from 1963 to 1980 as dead-bang evidence of failing schools.) The Sandia report, however, broke the scores down by various subgroups, and something astonishing emerged. Nearly every subgroup—ethnic minorities, rich kids, poor kids, middle class kids, top students, average students, low-ranked students—held steady or improved during those years. Yet overall scores dropped. How could that be? ...

Simple—statisticians call it Simpson’s paradox: The average can change in one direction while all the subgroups change in the opposite direction if proportions among the subgroups are changing. Early in the period studied, only top students took the test [and went on to college]. But during those twenty years, the pool of test takers expanded to include many lower-ranked students. Because the proportion of top students to all students was shrinking, the scores inevitably dropped. That decline signified not failure but rather progress toward what had been a national goal: extending educational opportunities to a broader range of the population.”²⁷⁸

In short, more students were taking the SAT than in past decades, including those from disadvantaged groups. *More aspirational students than in the past.* Or systemic changes in society made it easier for

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

more students to take that step. More people might have been skeptical of *ANAR*'s original claim if the media had routinely warned us that "[when] politicians... call for a return to the educational principles of the fifties, they forget that only 15 percent of students went on to college. More than half didn't even finish high school."²⁷⁹ It's so easy for elites to compare the present to the past knowing that people won't contemplate the percentage of students attending college at that time or if schools in that era were scapegoated as well. One of Rothstein's points in the book *The Way We Were?* is that schools have been scapegoated and criticized throughout the 20th century and even before; the 21st century is no different. Further, he tells us that, "In each generation the claims [against schools] proved false."²⁸⁰

"But this story [about educational crisis], whatever partial truths it contains, is more a culturally embedded fable that has remained mostly unchanged for a century than a factual account."²⁸¹

Richard Rothstein

As far as I know, Berliner and Biddle were the first to point out SNL's insight into this particular misrepresentation to a wide audience. They ended their critique of it in this way: "Surely this [outcome] should have been a matter for rejoicing, not alarm."²⁸²

The irony of ironies in this upside-down world of education. Imagine it. All student groups were actually holding *steady or slightly improving* over time and yet test scores were exploited in the 1980s as

²⁷⁹ Quartz, S. R., & Sejnowski, T. J. (2010). *Liars, lovers, and heroes: What the new brain science reveals about how we become who we are*. Harper Collins.

²⁸⁰ Rothstein, R. (1998). *The way we were?: The myths and realities of America's student achievement*. Brookings Inst Press.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Berliner, D. C., & Biddle, B. J. (1996). The manufactured crisis: Myths, fraud, and the attack on America's public schools. *Nassp Bulletin*, 80(576), 119-121.

an existential threat that America's schools posed against the nation's economic well-being—a threat equivalent to “an act of war.”²⁸³ It's ludicrous to think of test scores, even if they were low, in this way. But that demonstrates how crisis rhetoric, wielded by the powerful, can manipulate thinking in the body politic. More than anything, it produces subservient mentalities. It turns the public into what Freire called “an unthinking, manageable agglomeration.”²⁸⁴

One imagines that if government officials were trustworthy or committed to bringing knowledge to bear on society's great challenges (to paraphrase M.I.T.'s mission statement), then they would celebrate SNL's discovery and even offer a public apology to educators for *ANAR*'s decade of relentless scapegoating. Isn't that what accountability is about? Or that they might have acknowledged that some of the Great Society programs from the 1960s, such as Head Start and the Food Stamp Act, had benefited disadvantaged families, which culminated in an increase in high school completion rates and their children's entrance into higher education. But that notion runs counter to conservative ideology and the bipartisan effort to shift the public mind from holding the government accountable for improving societal well-being to expecting the government to hold schools accountable for the same results.

So, how did the government respond to this embarrassment in the 1990s? Did they show humility? Did they model accountability? What was the public's reaction to the U.S. government's *own* report

²⁸³ National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform. *The Elementary School Journal*, 84(2), 113-130.

²⁸⁴ Kreider, A. (1998). *Reviews of Paulo Freire's books*. The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). <http://schugurenky.faculty.asu.edu/freire/ak.html>

contradicting the claims of *ANAR* from the previous decade? There was none. Obviously, elites didn't want to acknowledge their misrepresentations, celebrate the success of educators, or past egalitarian-oriented policies. In fact, the Bush administration chose not to publish the Sandia Report at all; stating, in Bracey's account, that "it did not meet professional standards and was undergoing peer review."²⁸⁵ *A review that never led to the government unveiling it to the public like ANAR.*

Bracey (ever the detective) learned from Robert Huelskamp, one of the Sandia authors, that when the SNL team presented their findings in Washington D.C. "to staffers from Congress, the Department of Energy, and the Department of Education... David Kearns, former CEO of Xerox and then deputy secretary of education, said something along the lines of, 'You bury this or I'll bury you.'"²⁸⁶ Years later, Bracey phoned Lee Bray, the retired former Vice President at SNL. Bracey tells us, "Bray did not want to reopen old wounds, but he did say, 'The report was suppressed. They will deny it, but it was definitely suppressed.'"²⁸⁷ In the Orwellian doublespeak of education, *not meeting government standards* actually means not fitting the government's predetermined crisis narrative. *ANAR*, on the other hand, met professional standards by flouting scientific norms.

"One of the most thorough investigations into public education did not produce the expected results and instead, ended up being censored. ... The lack of coverage of the report, and the rancor with

²⁸⁵ Bracey, G. W. (2000). The 10th Bracey report on the condition of public education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(2), 133-144.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

which the report was met from government departments and, more importantly, from the ‘Education President’, George Bush, was astounding.”²⁸⁸

Project Censored

But here’s a troubling question: Knowing our collective vulnerabilities, would the government even need to deny its suppression? It doesn’t seem like the story about its suppression (told by scholar-activists like Bracey, Berliner, Biddle, and the author Ansary) had the *action potential* (if I can borrow a term from neuroscience) to affect the entrenched training of the body politic. Isn’t it clear the reform ‘train’ would stay on track regardless? It seems one best-selling rebuke of political fraud is not enough to change ‘the permanent way’ when the media culture is saturated with propaganda and elite-friendly narratives. Berliner and Biddle taught us what academia as the Fourth Estate needs to do, but too few are doing it in a society that cultivates subservient *unthinking* in the body politic.

The Sandia Report didn’t escape full censorship until the Bush administration left the White House. Bracey tells us it was finally published in the “May/June 1993 *Journal of Educational Research*, filling the entire issue. 5,000 people, few of whom have any burning interest in policy issues or in the fate of American public education, saw it.”²⁸⁹ (I once looked up the article in one of the loneliest parts of Chapman University’s library and it looked like it hadn’t been browsed in many years.)

²⁸⁸ Project Censored. (2015, July 7). *The Sandia report on education: A perfect lesson in censorship*. <https://www.projectcensored.org/3-the-sandia-report-on-education-a-perfect-lesson-in-censorship/>

²⁸⁹ Bracey, G. W. (2000). The 10th Bracey report on the condition of public education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(2), 133-144.

Is it fair to ask about the difference in public impact between publishing this report in an academic journal and full censorship? Is it fair to see its publication as a non-intervening intervention if most teachers never heard about its existence let alone the wider public? I've been to four different graduate schools of education and I never once heard students or professors mention it. It's strange to consider the vast difference between a government report becoming a decades-long catalyst of monumental consequence for the nation's schools and one that disappears into academic obscurity.

If one of our weaknesses is the lack of access to heterodox critiques challenging the status quo, then some solutions are clear. We need to help catalyze a mass migration to the real Fourth Estate: independent media news outlets that are adversarial toward state-corporate power. The public can't wait for the mainstream media to reveal how we've been manipulated in short news segments decades after the fact (and not even explore the vast consequences on society). Too rarely, it seems, do mainstream outlets interview leading critical thinkers and those who dissent with the official doctrines and orthodoxies of state-corporate power at any given time.

For example, how often has Chomsky, the world renowned public intellectual and dissident, been invited to speak on NPR, PBS, CNN, MSNBC, ABC, NBC, or CBS? How often are his essays accepted in the Op-ed section of major newspapers like *The New York Times*? It seems that the truth is Chomsky is typically ignored or even banned by mainstream outlets. If a world renowned public intellectual and dissident thinker is persona non grata for mainstream news outlets, imagine how lesser known critical thinkers and dissidents are treated.

One lesson we might take to heart is that the body politic needs to treat its vulnerability to elite manipulations by thinking of official doctrines and mainstream narratives more often as propaganda serving the interests of the powerful than as unfiltered truth.



Rhee Worship, 2021

Essay 9: Never Mind Leadershit

Assumption 1

It's worth noting that a high-level government official did make a public apology of sorts about *ANAR*'s legacy. That would be Terrel H. Bell, the U.S. Secretary of Education who actually commissioned the landmark report during President Reagan's first term in office. I say 'of sorts' because the apology was published in an academic journal and so it's not widely known. And while identifying the report's negative impact ("The 10 years since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* have been a splendid misery for American education."²⁹⁰), Bell didn't seem to necessarily regret his involvement. In any case, in an article entitled *Reflections One Decade After "A Nation at Risk,"* Bell confided:

"We had placed too much confidence in school reforms that affected only six hours [a day] of a child's life and ignored the other 18 hours each weekday plus the hours on weekends and holidays. ... In the face of many negative influences on our children that come from outside the school, we have done well to maintain our high school completion rate and our level of performance on achievement measures. ... We have foolishly concluded that any problems with the levels of academic achievement have been caused by faulty schools staffed by inept teachers..."²⁹¹

Terrel H. Bell

It's rather remarkable that the official responsible for *ANAR*'s publication zeros in on the crux of the school reform orthodoxy. Setting aside Zhao's critique of our collective assumption that standardized

²⁹⁰ Bell, T. H. (1993). Reflections one decade after a nation at risk. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 74(8), 592.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

tests are good measures of educational excellence, there are two other major assumptions underlying the entire orthodoxy, the *track ballast*, let's say, upon which elites have built 'the permanent way' for decades on end.

The first assumption is: Teachers are the most influential factor affecting student achievement rates on standardized tests. This assumption has been driven into the public's thinking. Once that assumption is accepted it then makes sense to talk about holding failing schools accountable for low test scores and not look anywhere else. However, that assumption ignores the inconvenient research evidence on the most influential factors affecting student achievement. At this point, it shouldn't surprise the reader that elites would ignore the evidence and instead hammer home their ideology. They're definitely consistent on that score.

As a way of rupturing this mental model deposited into our collective thinking it's important to consider how this notion presents children as decontextualized *blank slates* when they enter schools and de-problematizes their experiences outside of schools during their years as students within them. One of the more trustworthy voices on this issue in education is Richard Rothstein. In *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*, he tells us that ever since the Coleman Report from 1966 during the Johnson administration—when the idea that socioeconomic background had a greater influence on test scores than schools entered into our public discourse—education researchers have been *obsessed* with “refuting [that] conclusion.”²⁹²

²⁹² Rothstein, R. (2004). *Class and schools: Using social, economic, and educational reform to close the achievement gap*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

(That’s an important topic in itself—why have they been determined to reject that finding?)

“Nonetheless,” Rothstein puts forth, “scholarly efforts over four decades have consistently confirmed Coleman’s core finding; no analyst has been able to attribute less than two-thirds of the variation in achievement among schools to the family characteristics of their students.”²⁹³ In other words, when singling out this or that school as “failing” based on test results, what factor has the *most influence* over achievement rates? At least two-thirds of that variation is explained by family characteristics (particularly income levels).

Thus, the profound influence of socioeconomic background is the truth concealed by reformers’ persistent misrepresentation of teachers as the most influential factor affecting student achievement as measured by standardized tests.

“Consider me an object.
Put me in a vacuum.
Free of all conditions.
Free of air and friction.
Yeh, I’ll be hanging upside down.
And there I will swing.
For all eternity.”²⁹⁴

Eddie Vedder

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Vedder, E. (2006, February). Comatose. [Recorded by Pearl Jam]. On album *Pearl Jam* (Avocado album). [CD]. Seattle, Washington, US: Monkey Wrench.

“[Poverty is] a personality defect.”²⁹⁵

Margaret Thatcher

I need to stress that the profound influence of socioeconomic background doesn't shift blame for low test scores onto families as many have seemingly and unthinkingly assumed for decades. That would just be a way of shifting blame onto parents as if *society* doesn't exist (as Margaret Thatcher famously quipped); as if we all lived in a vacuum; as if situational contexts, social systems, and historical circumstances have no bearing on the behavior of individuals (like teachers or parents).

But in conservative framings it's never about the powerful individuals shaping the systems that individuals and families are embedded within—the systems (e.g., workplaces, schools, healthcare, law enforcement, safety nets, the economy at large) affecting our lives for good or ill. When elites attempt to shift blame for societal outcomes onto teachers or parents from low-income communities I think it's wise to think about Peter Senge's systems maxim: “When placed in the same system, people, however different, tend to produce the same results.”²⁹⁶ That's because social systems create patterns of behavior. That goes for teachers in top-down, anti-democratic, anti-constructivist cultures that impose hyper-accountability while stifling individual agency. That goes for families coping in an economic landscape designed to benefit corporate interests over the Common Good.

²⁹⁵ Bregman, R. (2017, May 22). *Poverty isn't a lack of character; it's a lack of cash*. TED Talks. https://www.ted.com/talks/rutger_bregman_poverty_isn_t_a_lack_of_character_it_s_a_lack_of_cash/footnotes?trk=organization-update-content_share-video-embed_share-article_title

²⁹⁶ Senge, P. M. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Currency. 42

“...social science has made lots of strides, and the basic insight is that if we want to change behavior we have to change the environment.”²⁹⁷

Dan Ariely

“I have argued elsewhere that teachers in the United States or England, typically, are no worse or better than teachers in higher performing countries like Finland or Canada.”²⁹⁸

Pasi Sahlberg

Remember the Coleman Report came out during the time period in which the federal government was shifting to the idea of educational reform as its primary anti-poverty program—its repositioning of accountability away from powerful individuals and New Deal-type programs. Therefore, scapegoats were and continue to be needed to relieve the government of the burden of improving societal well-being through egalitarian policies conflicting with their donors’ interests. In many ways, the Coleman Report threw a monkey wrench into the government’s rejection of New Deal-type activism by focusing attention on the influence of socioeconomic disadvantages (SEDs). That’s until *ANAR* fixed things in the popular culture with the right blend of propaganda—teaching us to focus on bad schools and not the conditions outside them.

“Although conventional opinion is that ‘failing’ schools contribute mightily to the achievement gap, evidence indicates that schools already do a great deal to combat it. Most of the social class differences in average academic potential exists by the time children are three years old. This

²⁹⁷ Ariely, D. (2019, December 17). *How to change your behavior for the better*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPBFVixnbDw>

²⁹⁸ Sahlberg, P. (2015, October 5). *Do teachers in Finland have more autonomy?* The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/do-teachers-in-finland-have-more-autonomy-48371>

difference is exacerbated during the years that children spend in school, but during these years the growth in the gap occurs mostly in the after-school hours and during the summertime, when children are not actually in classrooms.”²⁹⁹

Richard Rothstein

As Bell implied, the reform orthodoxy allows us to ignore how children’s time outside of school—including all those years before schooling even begins—affects their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. *Keep in mind the complexity of human development: all of these mind-body systems affect one another, for good or ill.* In a sense, the orthodoxy gives us permission to *not think* about how poverty affects those developmental processes; thus, granting us—and elites propagating these ideas—a clear conscience about our society’s treatment of its most disadvantaged children (which are disproportionately Black and Latinx).³⁰⁰

Rather than blaming *government* for not ameliorating poverty like other industrialized nations (e.g., the child poverty rate in Finland was at 3.6 percent in 2017 while the U.S. stood at 21.2 percent—ranked between Mexico and Chile³⁰¹) or blaming *businesses* for not providing livable wages like they did before Richistan economics or blaming *ourselves* for tolerating our government’s elite activism—the reform orthodoxy allows us to blame *failing schools* and teachers as the culprits

²⁹⁹ Rothstein, R. (2004). *Class and schools: Using social, economic, and educational reform to close the achievement gap*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

³⁰⁰ Statista. (2021b, March 12). *Child poverty in OECD countries 2018*.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/264424/child-poverty-in-oecd-countries/>

³⁰¹ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2019). *OECD family database*. OECD.
<http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>

responsible for what's wrong in American society. That's the genius of parasitic memes affecting unconscious biases and assumptions.

“Poverty is the bleeding edge of a more pervasive American shortcoming—massive economic insecurity. About half of American families now live paycheck to paycheck, are financially fragile, and earn less than needed to cover basic living expenses, let alone save for the future.”³⁰²

James G. Speth

“We are now approaching the level of inequality that marks dysfunctional societies—it is a club that we would distinctly not want to join, including Iran, Jamaica, Uganda, and the Philippines.”³⁰³

Joseph Stiglitz

Why is this scapegoating so successful? Perhaps it's because there's a perfect storm of factors. For example, it exploits our illiteracies and blind spots. It exploits our collective vulnerability to crisis rhetoric. Further, I believe it's partly because the teacher culprit explanation offers a salient and simplistic idea that finds traction in our unconscious mind while the truth requires effortful, analytical thinking. It probably helps that everyone has been in boring classrooms or recognized teachers with poor instructional skills and so that explanation has emotional traction deep inside us where biases and assumptions take hold. I noticed poor instructional skills at Harvard University, but didn't assume

³⁰² Speth, J. G. (2021b, February 9). *America is the best country in the world at being last*. Alternet.Org. <https://www.alternet.org/2015/01/america-best-country-world-being-last/>

³⁰³ Stiglitz, J. E. (2012). *The price of inequality: How today's divided society endangers our future*. WW Norton & Company.

that Ivy League schools were failing or acting destructively towards the economy (despite the astronomical student loans required to attend them if you're not wealthy).

Let's consider more counter-evidence to the reformers' mantra that teachers are 'the single most important factor affecting student achievement' on standardized tests. In order to strengthen this belief reformers have emphasized value-added models (VAMs) in recent decades, as mentioned earlier about Michael's teacher (the boy without a complete brain). VAMs are used "to estimate effects of individual teachers or schools on student achievement while accounting for differences in student background."³⁰⁴ *Accounting for differences* means isolating teacher and school effects on student achievement because many researchers—I would call them elite-activists—are obsessed with holding teachers and schools accountable rather than more complex entities. But it also means discarding the situational complexity *outside* of schools that indirectly affect student achievement, as Bell acknowledged.

I would also argue that isolating teacher effects ignores the situational complexity *inside* schools because there is a complex web of factors affecting teacher performance, such as levels of trust and autocratic leadership as mentioned earlier. *In systems, everything affects everything else*. Isolating factors is just a convenient reductionism. As one study put it: "teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions."³⁰⁵

³⁰⁴ American Statistical Associations. (2014, April 8). *ASA statement on using value-added models for educational assessment*. <https://www.amstat.org/asa/files/pdfs/POL-ASAVAM-Statement.pdf>

³⁰⁵ Hirsch, E., & Emerick, S. (2007, January 31). *Teacher working conditions are student learning conditions: A report on the 2006 North Carolina teacher working conditions survey*. ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED498770>

Bell didn't quite acknowledge that *ANAR* negatively impacted conditions *inside* of schools, but it doesn't require much scrutiny to see that the report negatively impacted both—*conditions inside and outside of schools!* That's quite a feat and demonstration of power. That's why it frustrates me that schools of education, as a collective body, aren't forgoing 'neutrality on a moving train' in a way that matters on these topics.

In any case, the American Statistical Association (ASA) reported in 2014 that, "VAMs are increasingly promoted or mandated as a component in high-stakes decisions such as determining compensation, evaluating and ranking teachers, hiring or dismissing teachers, awarding tenure, and closing schools."³⁰⁶

Notice the punitive uses of VAMs—that's typical of 'the permanent way', perhaps because elites use it to redirect real animosity in the body politic away from themselves.

Have you ever heard an elite reformer refer to the ASA's position on VAMs? It's doubtful despite their adoration for cold quantification, their "quantomania"³⁰⁷ (e.g., high-stakes tests, benchmarks, percentile rankings, achievement status, standard scores, scaled scores, growth reports, focused interim assessment blocks). That's because the ASA's position is the following: "Most VAM studies find that teachers account for about 1% to 14% of the variability in test scores, and that the majority of opportunities for quality improvement are found in the system-level conditions. Ranking teachers by

³⁰⁶ American Statistical Association. (2014, April 8). *ASA statement on using value-added models for educational assessment*. <https://www.amstat.org/asa/files/pdfs/POL-ASAVAM-Statement.pdf>

³⁰⁷ Monbiot, G. (2019, April 13). *Quantomania*. George Monbiot. <https://www.monbiot.com/2019/04/13/quantomania/>

their VAM scores can have unintended consequences that reduce quality.”³⁰⁸ In other words, the punitive uses of VAMs can affect the situational complexity inside schools in such a way that—ironically—reduces the quality of instruction. In the Orwellian world of education, that reduction in quality can be used as an argument for more VAMs and punitive actions against teachers. In ‘the permanent way’, vicious cycles—destructive feedback loops—abound.

Isn’t it rare for any of us to look back at the teachers in our lives who demonstrated poor instructional skills and think about the situational complexity around them that might have negatively affected their teaching, such as autocratic leadership or adverse policies or inadequate funding? *Being blind to system effects makes it easy to scapegoat individuals, even relatively powerless ones.*

There’s a similar, but far more serious blind spot to situational complexity that’s applicable to the lives of children who grow up with socioeconomic disadvantages (SEDs); disadvantages that increase with the conditions of living in poverty. It makes one think that ‘the permanent way’ is all about capitalizing on our collective vulnerabilities and blind spots—our systems blindness, our economic illiteracy, our lack of curiosity about how “poverty... gets under the skin... and affects the way we learn and the way we behave... and our physical and mental health.”³⁰⁹ Elites seem to exploit these biases and blind spots in order to protect plutocratic, anti-egalitarian agendas.

³⁰⁸ American Statistical Associations. (2014, April 8). *ASA statement on using value-added models for educational assessment*. <https://www.amstat.org/asa/files/pdfs/POL-ASAVAM-Statement.pdf>

³⁰⁹ Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality. (2016, October 26). *Childhood development: Jack Shonkoff*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhWzxvi3tZ4&t=177s>

It's a shame that, in our culture, "we tend to look for the person in the situation more than we search for the situation that makes the person."³¹⁰ Isolating factors helps one miss the forest for the trees: picking out individuals with little status or power as societal culprits in order to protect those with power shaping the educational system itself and the larger systems in our society affecting child development in complex, indirect, and non-obvious ways.

If Rothstein's point in *Class and Schools* made one imagine two-thirds of the testing variation coming from *outside* of schools, then the ASA makes one imagine 86% or more of the variation *not* coming from teachers. That idea injects what I would call a heterodox rupture into the training of the body politic on educational issues. Or we might say it starts to de-parasitize the mind of elite-friendly memes. If Rothstein's and the ASA's points were widely known, that information could rupture an implanted bias generating subservient unthinking in the public mind.

It's not surprising elites haven't been honest with the public about what accounts for most of the variability in student test scores. It's because most of the variation comes from factors elites want to deflect the public's attention away from—non-school based factors that invoke the need for real governmental solutions. The ASA tells us: "The majority of the variation in test scores is attributable to factors outside of the teacher's control such as student and family background, poverty, curriculum, and unmeasured influences."³¹¹ In other words, most of the variation in test scores comes from factors that elite reformers ignore or trivialize to keep 'the permanent way' intact. That's how elites train the

³¹⁰ Zimbardo, P. G., & Leippe, M. R. (1991). *The psychology of attitude change and social influence*. McGraw-Hill Book Company.

³¹¹ American Statistical Associations. (2014, April 8). *ASA statement on using value-added models for educational assessment*. <https://www.amstat.org/asa/files/pdfs/POL-ASAVAM-Statement.pdf>

body politic to think in a subservient manner supporting plutocratic agendas and non-solutions for the Common Good.

Let's consider another piece of counter-evidence against the reform orthodoxy. I once took a free online course at Stanford University called *America's Course on Poverty*. In it, I watched a short module video titled *The Rise in the Achievement Gap* by Sean Reardon, an American educational sociologist and expert on the income-achievement gap. Reardon explains that in one of his research projects he looked at 13 large studies between 1960 and 2007 to see if the achievement gap between children from low-, middle-, and high-income families grew larger over the decades since income inequality has grown over the same time span in our society. He found that the achievement gap has grown significantly over the decades between 1) children from low- and high-income families and 2) children from middle- and high-income families. Reardon then tells us, "So, this means that poor children [now] lag about three to four grades behind their high-income peers in school, and middle-class children lag about two grades behind their high-income peers in school."³¹²

It's strange how testing can be used to define a child's growth in terms of grades as if they're always racing against or playing catch-up with their more advantaged peers, but that's what an exam-oriented culture—like China's—teaches us to do. *They're years behind! Grade-levels behind! Leave no child behind! Oh, the "soft bigotry"*³¹³ *of those teachers!* This mentality reminds me of Lewis Carroll's line

³¹² Reardon, S. (2016, November 10). *The Rise in the Income Achievement Gap: Sean Reardon*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXZM4Qur76I>

³¹³ Nelson, L. (2015, August 19). *Racism in the classroom: The "soft bigotry of low expectations" is just regular bigotry*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2015/8/19/9178573/teacher-students-race-study>

from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* during the Red Queen's race: "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place."³¹⁴ Thus, "failing" schools serving disadvantaged students need to do all the desperate running they can despite the fact that the income-achievement gap persists year after year and decade after decade. The income-achievement gap is reflected in every major standardized test, but never mind that. And never mind the influence of socioeconomic disadvantages (SEDs) creating the gap.

Reardon's most provocative insight comes from answering a second question: "Is this widening achievement gap happening while children are in school?" This is his heterodox rupturing answer: "The striking thing is that the gap between high- and low-income children is very big when kids enter kindergarten and doesn't get much bigger as children progress through school... [thus] most of where the gap is coming from is happening *before kids even get to the kindergarten door*"³¹⁵ [my italics]. Thus, most of the gap is coming from the complex systems affecting families and children in ways we're trained—through elite teachings—*never* to think seriously about; never to consider through a moral framework.

There's an insight you'll never hear escape the lips of a powerful reformer. The achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children is already in place before kids enter the kindergarten door at all those "failing" schools.

³¹⁴ Khurana, S. (2019, February 3). *Famous Lewis Carroll quotes analysed and explained in detail*. ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/lewis-carroll-decoded-quotes-2832744>

³¹⁵ Reardon, S. (2016, November 10). *The Rise in the Income Achievement Gap: Sean Reardon*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXZM4Qur76I>

Perhaps the only powerful reformer with the integrity to utter those words if he were still alive today is, ironically, the U.S. Secretary of Education who commissioned *ANAR*. It's important to note that Bell doesn't address the research on that first assumption (e.g., the income-achievement gap), but he does get to the gist of it: that outside-of-school factors are far more influential on student achievement—as well as child development generally—than school-based factors, including teacher effects. Importantly, Bell *does* address what inevitably follows from that core assumption: the error of blaming schools and teachers for the income-achievement gap. I would argue that's the real purpose of the orthodoxy—shifting blame onto the easiest targets, like teachers, so as not to blame state or corporate power.

However, Bell's critique of *ANAR*'s legacy only suggests that the root causes of low student achievement lie elsewhere—the higher percentage of hours in a child's life outside of school, the negative influences of outside-of-school factors. Unfortunately, that *elsewhere* (i.e., the systemic effects of socioeconomic disadvantages) is such a blind spot in our popular culture that it never finds a place in the public imagination. I would argue that elites work diligently to prevent that from happening by dismissing or trivializing those effects (“We don't use poverty as an excuse for low achievement”³¹⁶). The fact that elites persistently do this is just another clue that poverty is precisely what the powerful don't want people to think about unless using their frames (i.e., “failing” schools create poverty). Like

³¹⁶ Klonsky, M. (2010, December 31). *2010, the year poverty became nothing but an excuse*. Education Matters. <https://jaxkidsmatter.blogspot.com/2010/12/2010-year-poverty-became-nothing-but.html>

a defense mechanism, the rhetoric of the powerful—when probed and reflected on—betrays what they’re attempting to conceal or distort with vociferous reframings.

“We’re never going to fix poverty in America until we fix education.”³¹⁷

Joel Klein

“Half of our children face a lifetime of despair and poverty because we are failing to prepare them with high-quality academic and character education. This preventable ‘cancer of ignorance’ is the most significant moral issue of our time!”³¹⁸

Reclaiming Our Nation at Risk

This blind spot about poverty reminds me of Daniel A. Domenech, the former director of the AASA quoted earlier, when he referenced the experiences of disadvantaged students with the line: “...students who are exposed to various social and economic *issues*”³¹⁹ [my italics]. There couldn’t be a blander and more ambiguous phrase for how poverty gets under the skin, how it’s “toxic to the developing brain,”³²⁰ about the “biology of disadvantage”³²¹ than the words ‘exposure to social and economic

³¹⁷ Klein, J. (2014, July 29). *Joel Klein on education and poverty*. Children’s Scholarship Fund.

<https://scholarshipfund.org/joel-klein-on-education-and-poverty/>

³¹⁸ Lloyd, K., Ramsey, D., & Bell, T. H. (1998). *Reclaiming our nation at risk. Lessons learned: Reforming our public schools*. Salt Lake City, UT: Terrell H. Bell Knowledge Network for Educational Reform.

³¹⁹ Domenech, D. A. (2016, May). Our country’s confounding chasm. *School Administrator*, 73 (5). Retrieved from: https://home/chronos/u-36cd2dc5e3f065a456a4b38080782ca5e7063adf/MyFiles/Downloads/Our_countrys_confounding_chasm.pdf

³²⁰ Evans, G.W. et al. (2011, winter). Stressing out the poor. *Pathways*. Retrieved from https://inequality.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/media/_media/pdf/pathways/winter_2011/PathwaysWinter11_Evans.pdf

³²¹ Evans, G. W., Chen, E., Miller, G., & Seeman, T. (2012). *How poverty gets under the skin: A life course perspective*. In V. Maholmes & R. B. King (Eds.), *Oxford library of psychology. The Oxford handbook of poverty and child development* (p. 13–36). Oxford University Press.

issues'. But, in all fairness to Domenech, it's extremely difficult to find a compelling way to describe the systemic effects of living in poverty so that it makes a strong impression on the public mind.

This systems blindness about poverty is critical to the preservation of 'the permanent way'. In the context of education, the complexity of poverty's effects—often studied as socioeconomic disadvantages (SEDs) or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)—makes it easier for elites to dismiss and supplant them with a simplistic, agent-specific, linear cause-and-effect idea about teachers as “the single most important factor affecting student achievement.”³²²

To make matters worse, academia does too little to challenge that myth in the popular culture. Never mind the systemic effects of poverty on early childhood (before children reach the kindergarten door). Never mind the systemic effects of SEDs on the brain, such as executive functions, stress regulation, neurogenesis, and regions associated with language functions.³²³ Never mind the complexity of SEDs and ACEs on children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Never mind the effects of inadequate prenatal care, “negative birth outcomes,”³²⁴ exposure to violence and crime, child abuse, substandard housing, homelessness, malnutrition, food insecurity, mental illness, and economic distress—all risks associated with socioeconomic disadvantages. Never mind the insidious effects of high income inequality on families and human development. Never mind the situational complexity

³²² Peterson, M. B. (2014). Transforming teacher education: What went wrong with teacher training, and how we can fix it. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 83(4), 598.

³²³ Kim, P., Evans, G. W., Chen, E., Miller, G., & Seeman, T. (2018). How socioeconomic disadvantages get under the skin and into the brain to influence health development across the lifespan. *Handbook of life course health development*, 463-497.

³²⁴ Ibid.

affecting lives for good or ill in a society where the government has abandoned egalitarian or Broadland economics. Never mind the federal government’s shift from a New Deal-oriented sense of responsibility “for ensuring the economic security and welfare of its citizens”³²⁵ to its preferred orientation—prioritizing business interests and corporate welfare. Never mind America’s perverse exceptionalism and what it means for child well-being in our society. Never mind learning from other societies that are exceptional in positive ways in terms of supporting families and children like the Nordic countries which outperform our own society on so many indices. Never mind the idea of *society*.

“We are not Denmark.”³²⁶

Hillary Clinton

The school reform orthodoxy is an invitation *not to think* deeply about important societal issues. It’s an invitation to disregard the research that elites have already dismissed for us. It’s an invitation not to question elite-friendly narratives in the mainstream media. It’s an invitation to participate in uncomplicated conversations about America’s schools.

“This does not look like a failing school system to me. There is a huge political and democratic failure, however, in our toleration of poverty, but those among the elite don’t want to talk about it.

³²⁵ Mathis, W. J., & Trujillo, T. M. (Eds.). (2016). *Learning from the Federal Market? Based Reforms: Lessons for ESSA*. IAP.

³²⁶ Stanley, M. (2016, February 26). “*We are not Denmark*”: *Hillary Clinton and liberal American exceptionalism*. Common Dreams. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2016/02/26/we-are-not-denmark-hillary-clinton-and-liberal-american-exceptionalism>

It's a safer 'wealth protector' to deflect public attention to our 'failing' public schools and to ignore the poor."³²⁷

Richard A. Gibboney

Once the assumption about teachers as the most important factor is established, the other assumptions in the orthodoxy fall into place: schools are *failing* because too many teachers in them are inept, incompetent—as demonstrated by low test scores. (And that incompetence is protected by unions, and so of course unions are also part of the problem). In truth, national averages on international standardized tests are not low unless the scores from schools with high percentages of disadvantaged students are included—and the U.S. has a higher rate of children living in poverty than most industrialized nations. But the mainstream media tends to ignore the curse of poverty in our society. They model to us how to have conversations about education *untroubled* by research contradicting the reform orthodoxy.

The mainstream media also keep us from questioning whether test scores are even a good measure of educational success or a child's potential.

³²⁷ Gibboney, R. A. (2008). Why an undemocratic capitalism has brought public education to its knees: A manifesto. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(1), 21-31.

Assumption 2

“The curse of poverty has no justification in our age.”³²⁸

Martin Luther King, Jr.

The second major assumption underlying the school reform orthodoxy comes from *ANAR*: the belief that students’ low test scores negatively impact our society’s economic well-being. Is this an instance of conservative elites believing in society—if it’s being harmed by disadvantaged children or their teachers? In the fifth essay, *Shock Doctrine & Paper Sputnik*, I addressed the cultivation of this assumption in the public mind and some of the historical evidence against it.

Ironically, leaders in China and Singapore, the world’s two ‘superstar nations’ in terms of international student test scores, are worried that their exam-oriented education will increasingly *harm* their nations’ economic futures—just the opposite. Their leaders’ fears are throwing a monkey wrench into one of the reform orthodoxy’s core assumptions, but does the mainstream media clamor about it? Do they ever bring it up?

If one thinks about the research on the income-achievement gap, the *ANAR* assumption appears as a twisted inversion of the research pointing at the impact of economic realities (i.e., poverty, socioeconomic status, SEDs) on child well-being and student achievement. Elites have simply reversed

³²⁸ King, M. L. (2017). *Martin Luther King Jr: An extraordinary life*. The Seattle Times. <https://projects.seattletimes.com/mlk/words-going.html#:~:text=The%20curse%20of%20poverty%20has,abundant%20animal%20life%20around%20them.>

the line of causation. This assumption is critical to the reform orthodoxy because if the public understood the curse of poverty,³²⁹ particularly in early childhood, as a major factor affecting the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children “before kids even get to the kindergarten door,”³³⁰ then the orthodoxy would be exposed as a sham. The scapegoating of schools would be exposed as a decades-long, bipartisan elite manipulation of the public mind. That is, if challenges to the reform orthodoxy were communicated in a compelling fashion to the body politic. It’s a challenge I wish schools of education would wholeheartedly embrace in the spirit of Friere, Zinn, Berliner, Bracey, and countless others.

It makes sense that *ANAR* would twist and turn upside-down the idea that poverty negatively affects student achievement into the idea that low student achievement negatively affects a society’s economic well-being. As mentioned before, the Coleman Report from 1966 threw a monkey wrench into the desire among elites to abandon New Deal-types of social and economic protections for the vast majority in favor of the idea that “compensatory education”³³¹ is society’s best means for addressing poverty and inequality. The former idea conflicted with the interests of corporate elites (i.e., the donor class) and the latter provided a scapegoat for the poverty, income inequality, and economic distress that plutocratic agendas would inevitably generate in our society. The latter also transformed our collective notions of accountability; shifting the federal government from the entity *held accountable* by the

³²⁹ King, M. L. (2017). *Martin Luther King Jr: An extraordinary life*. The Seattle Times. <https://projects.seattletimes.com/mlk/words-going.html#:~:text=The%20curse%20of%20poverty%20has,abundant%20animal%20life%20around%20them>.

³³⁰ Reardon, S. (2016, November 10). *The Rise in the Income Achievement Gap: Sean Reardon*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXZM4Qur76I>

³³¹ Mathis, W. J., & Trujillo, T. M. (Eds.). (2016). *Learning from the Federal Market? Based Reforms: Lessons for ESSA*. IAP.

public to the entity *holding schools accountable* for the public's sake. Doubtless, the latter orientation is a far more comfortable position for the powerful in our political duopoly.

ANAR ingeniously shocked the public mind, wiping away vexing thoughts about the effects of poverty on child development and replacing them with the simpler notion that failing schools were acting like “an unfriendly foreign power”³³² by putting the entire nation's economy at risk. Isn't it revealing that elites championed the idea that *competition* in the market economy was at risk, at peril, threatened by schools, rather than the idea that the development and trajectories of flesh-and-blood children were at risk, at peril, threatened by the curse of poverty?³³³

It should be emphasized that the *ANAR*-inspired specter used for ‘the permanent way’ of K-12 educational reforms is not the same one used throughout the 20th century or before. History shows that the disastrous effects of “failing” schools or bad teachers are whatever elites need to distance themselves from in terms of accountability. For example, in the late 1950s, it was the hysteria generated in the body politic about the Soviets orbiting satellites around the Earth before the United States since some believed—or were led to believe—the result would be *apocalyptic* for the U.S. (“Nothing less than *control of the heavens* was at stake. It was Armageddon, the final and decisive battle between good and evil”).³³⁴

³³² National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform. *The Elementary School Journal*, 84(2), 113-130.

³³³ King, M. L. (2017). *Martin Luther King Jr. An extraordinary life*. The Seattle Times. <https://projects.seattletimes.com/mlk/words-going.html#:~:text=The%20curse%20of%20poverty%20has,abundant%20animal%20life%20around%20them.>

³³⁴ Bracey, G. W. (2009). *Education hell: Rhetoric vs. reality* (1st Edition). Editorial Projects in Education.

Thus, in the late 1950s, elites pinned this perceived ‘defeat’ on the *crisis in education*; a presumed decline in mathematics and science compared to the Soviets. President Eisenhower even blamed the influence of John Dewey on education—too much ‘whole-child’ thinking, not enough ‘basics’ (the opposite of what Chinese leaders have now realized).

In reality, the historical record shows Sputnik’s prior launch had nothing to do with America’s schools and everything to do with the Eisenhower administration’s own internal decisions about rocket programs, such as not greenlighting the Jupiter-C rocket which was capable of reaching orbit before Sputnik 1’s launch. Further, how many Americans know Eisenhower was initially pleased the Soviets had orbited a satellite first and the self-serving reason behind it? Rather than act transparently or with humility, elites scapegoated schools and the mainstream media dutifully amplified it (as explained in Bracey’s *Education Hell: Rhetoric Vs. Reality*).

It seems to me the historical record has never been corrected in our public discourse. Shouldn’t every school of education correct this fallacy as a matter of principle with every new cohort?

Thus, President Obama (who, ironically, sent his own children to Dewey’s Laboratory School in Chicago) could exclaim in the wake of the global financial crisis that “our generation’s Sputnik moment is back”³³⁵ in order to include schools in his critique of the crisis! Thus, the meaning of

³³⁵ Obama, B. H. (2014, August 8). “*Our generation’s Sputnik moment is back*”: President Obama reiterates. American Institute of Physics. <https://www.aip.org/fyi/2010/our-generation%E2%80%99s-sputnik-moment-back-president-obama-reiterates-his-support-rd>

Sputnik is still divorced from the reality of what happened—more than six decades later. In a world where doublespeak is debunked, Sputnik ought to mean something like: *the ease in which the powerful can galvanize the body politic through scapegoating the powerless*. It should mean how easy it is for the powerful to escape accountability—whether politicians are being ‘upstaged’ by a rival nation or their Wall Street donors create a global financial crisis.

It’s so outrageous that President Obama criticized schools in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008. It’s as if elites are under an imperative to train the public mind to keep associating bad economic outcomes with schools rather than with the entities actually at fault, such as the malfeasance of the financial sector. Elites also have to pretend that the government’s most virtuous role is holding schools accountable rather than holding corporations like Goldman Sachs accountable even in the wake of the worst economic recession at the time since the Great Depression. *Thus, real crises threaten to expose the absurdity of the manufactured ones.*

In 1981, Bell wanted to produce a “Sputnik-like event.”³³⁶ *ANAR* definitely accomplished that ambition by recycling the educational specter and channeling the public’s discontent with their own economic security in the 1980s. And its legacy helped powerful elites escape accountability as the society shifted from Broadland to Richistan economics (i.e., broadly shared prosperity to hyperconcentration of income at the top) from the 1980s to the present.

³³⁶ Bracey, G. W. (2009). *Education hell: Rhetoric vs. reality* (1st Edition). Editorial Projects in Education.

To put it another way, the school reform orthodoxy has deflected attention from “a shift by Washington away from policies that had built the American middle class... in favor of policies that [cater] to Wall Street, corporate chieftains, and America’s wealthiest citizens.”³³⁷ From that perspective, the *ANAR*-inspired ‘permanent way’ of K-12 educational reforms represents one of the greatest achievements in modern propaganda because after four decades its discredited narrative is still helping to deflect attention from America’s shift to Richistan economics. In a post-truth world, what’s discredited is only problematic if the body politic learns about it in significant numbers.

This point cannot be stressed enough: *ANAR* came at the best time for state-corporate power. It relaunched the scapegoating script that’s been employed for generations, but this time it reframed failing schools and incompetent teachers as the main culprits for the *economic turmoil* in the wider society. Never mind monetary policy. Never mind changes in taxation rates for the wealthiest (from the 1970s to the 80s, the average corporate tax rate dropped from 46 to 34 percent while the average top-bracket rate dropped from 70 to 39 percent³³⁸). Never mind the effects of de-unionization and de-industrialization on our society. Never mind the “shredding of the social safety nets”³³⁹ through coded racism and other strategies.³⁴⁰ Never mind what Jacob S. Hacker describes as the “massive shift of economic risk from the broad shoulders of government and corporations onto the fragile backs of American families”³⁴¹ in terms of pensions and healthcare coverage. Never mind that “the earnings of

³³⁷ Barlett, D. L., & Steele, J. B. (2012). *The betrayal of the American dream*. Public Affairs.

³³⁸ Batra, R. (2014). *Greenspan’s fraud: how two decades of his policies have undermined the global economy*. St. Martin’s Press.

³³⁹ Davis, J. (2019). *The global 1980s: People, power and profit*. Routledge.

³⁴⁰ Temin, P. (2017). *The vanishing middle class: Prejudice and power in a dual economy*. The MIT Press.

³⁴¹ Hacker, J. (2016, November 16). *The great risk shift: Jacob Hacker*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDz0_j3fSco

median-income workers have not risen for forty years.”³⁴² Never mind the gradual shift to a *dual economy* in the U.S., a characteristic of developing countries—with a growing *low-wage* sector (the bottom 80 percent of incomes) and a small *high-wage* sector (the top 20 percent of incomes).³⁴³ Never mind America’s perverse exceptionalism compared to other industrialized nations, which is the real set of systemic crises that journalists ought to be relentlessly shining a light on until it resonates in the public mind.

All the Richistan aspects of this Machiavellian, Orwellian, Carrollinian, Kafkaesque (MOCK) puzzle—about the real threats to the vast majority—is fairly easy to get the public to ignore. That’s because these issues *are* mostly ignored by politicians and the mainstream media and supplanted with deflections and distractions from the root causes of America’s social and economic problems. And further, as I’ve stressed throughout, academia has done too little to counter these propagandistic schemes—at least when it comes to public pedagogy and impacting thought in the body politic.

³⁴² Temin, P. (2017). *The vanishing middle class: Prejudice and in a dual economy*. The MIT Press.

³⁴³ *Ib*

Essay 10: Safe Repository for Elite Deceptions

“This is a dark and puzzling time in American education.”³⁴⁴

Diane Ravitch

And so, in my eyes, that’s the situation in America’s schools—the main pieces to this Machiavellian, Orwellian, Carrollinian, Kafkaesque (MOCK) puzzle of what’s been happening to our educational system and our collective thinking about educational reforms that sustains it. Behind the rhetoric, the constant push for ‘school accountability’ is a long-established deflection, a scheme allowing elites to escape accountability for their own policies by focusing the public’s attention on the specter of educational crisis. *Essentially, it’s the use of ‘accountability’ at the bottom to avoid accountability at the top.* What does the specter conceal? Since the 1980s, elites have been obfuscating our political duopoly’s decades-long commitment to anti-egalitarian economic policies benefiting corporate wealth and power at the expense of the vast majority’s well-being and economic security. I think a critical reading of recent history reveals that pro-corporate, donor-driven economic policy intensified and accelerated in the 1980s and remains the political norm to this day whether the Republicans or Democrats are in power.

Because of the constant need for obfuscation, K-12 educational reforms are perpetually locked into ‘the permanent way’ by necessity: the inchoate discontent generated by Richistan economics for most

³⁴⁴ Solidarity.net.au. (2015, June 20). *More than a score—Lessons from a teacher rebellion*. Solidarity Online. <https://www.solidarity.net.au/reviews/more-than-a-score-lessons-from-a-teacher-rebellion/>

of the population needs to be channeled in a way that deflects attention from its root causes. In this case, “the root of the root”³⁴⁵ is a political system that’s more accurately described as *plutocratic* or *oligarchic* than *democratic*. It’s a political system that deliberately fails to address the needs of the majority with few repercussions; it’s a system devoted to its donors’ best interests; a government that Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel laureate economist, described as: “Of the 1%, by the 1%, [and] for 1%.”³⁴⁶

And in a perversion of the eighteenth century notion of the Fourth Estate, the mainstream media help to *protect* our plutocratic system by amplifying elite-friendly narratives about “failing” schools and “educational crisis” while mostly ignoring critiques of the school reform orthodoxy.

The fact the terms plutocracy and oligarchy are hardly ever used in the mainstream media about the U.S. speaks volumes about our cultural blindness to what’s happening in our own society; a blindness generated from mental models deposited into our collective thinking through elite-friendly narratives.

I suspect this blindness will remain a problem until there’s a shift in the public’s preferences in terms of where most of us get our news—a shift towards independent, critical outlets with an adversarial approach to power and interpretations of the world more aligned with reality than party ideology. For example, a shift from sources like CNN, NBC, MSNBC, *The New York Times*, NPR, and Fox News—outlets typically representing the views of one or both factions of our political duopoly—to

³⁴⁵ Cummings, E. E. (1991). *[i carry your heart with me(i carry it in)]*. Poetry Magazine.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/49493/i-carry-your-heart-with-me-i-carry-it-in>

³⁴⁶ Stiglitz, J. E. (2017, December 16). *Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%*. Vanity Fair.

<https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105>

adversarial sources like *Democracy Now!*, the *Intercept*, the *Real News Network*, *Truthout*, *CounterSpin* radio, *The Tight Rope*, *Common Dreams*, *The Laura Flanders Show*, *Jacobin*, *Renegade Inc.*, *Rising with Krystal & Saagar*, FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), and independent journalists like Glenn Greenwald and Matt Taibbi at *Substack*.³⁴⁷

The best shorthand I know for judging the critical integrity of a media news outlet is whether they welcome intellectual dissidents and heterodox thinkers onto their programs or avoid them. It appears that mainstream outlets typically ignore or even ban them (which seems to happen often to Chomsky despite his stature as one of the most respected public intellectuals in the world).

It would be a hopeful sign if the low public trust in the mainstream media—it's been fluctuating between 40 to 45 percent since 2012—translated into increasing viewership for independent, adversarial news sources in the 2020s.³⁴⁸

In a similar vein, one trend that appears positive is that a higher percentage of Generation Z (those born after 1997) want an “activist government”³⁴⁹ that actually solves societal problems. According to the Pew Research Center, 70% of the Gen Z cohort feel that way compared to 64% of Millennials (born

³⁴⁷ FAIR. (2019, August 6). *Online news sources*. <https://fair.org/take-action-now/other-media-activism-groups/online-news-sources/>

³⁴⁸ Brenan, B. M. (2021, March 23). *Americans' trust in mass media edges down to 41%*. Gallup.Com. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/267047/americans-trust-mass-media-edges-down.aspx>

³⁴⁹ Parker, K., & Igielnik, R. (2020, May 30). *On the cusp of adulthood and facing an uncertain future: What we know about gen z so far*. Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>

between 1981 - 1996), 53% of Gen X, 49% of Boomers, and 39% of the Silent Generation.³⁵⁰ Thus, the federal government's shift from New Deal-styled government accountability "for ensuring the economic security and welfare of its citizens"³⁵¹ to instead holding schools accountable for the nation's economic security might be nearing the end of its viability as an ideological smokescreen for pursuing anti-egalitarian policies.

It's also important to realize that there's a second mystery in the realm of educational reforms. Elites have imposed so many adverse—rather than helpful—reforms on the educational system. But why is that? Is that by necessity? It's not clear that perpetual scapegoating requires it. Is that about reproducing the appearance of failure to mirror the crisis rhetoric? Is it about maintaining the federal government's preferred role as *accountabilist* in the orthodoxy's framing? Or is it just a byproduct of top-down cultures blind to the negative effects of imposed "solutions"? As long as standardized test scores are used to measure educational success, elites can always exploit the income-achievement gap as a sign of failure across the board (if distinctions between income groups are glossed over) or as a sign of perpetual failure in high-poverty schools.

Why not allow public schools serving disadvantaged students to look and function more like the private, affluent schools that embrace the progressive, democratic tradition in education? Why not let disadvantaged children go to schools more like the ones elites tend to send their own children to—like the Dewey Laboratory School, Sidwell Friends, Georgetown Day School, and Waldorfs? Why not

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Mathis, W. J., & Trujillo, T. M. (Eds.). (2016). *Learning from the Federal Market? Based Reforms: Lessons for ESSA*. IAP.

allow the public educational system to become bottom-up labs of innovation and experimentation?

Why not stop pretending that such a pluralistic paradigm shift requires charters or private education management organizations (EMOs) to lead us into that reality? Why not actually commit to helping disadvantaged children at least in terms of their schooling even while continuing to disadvantage their families through anti-egalitarian economic policies?

Are elites fearful of democratic contagion? Are they, without knowing it, fearful of the synergy between the democratic spirit and constructivism with its emphasis on individual agency? Do those fears explain the attraction to top-down solutions? Do they explain the attraction to reform movements stressing the academic basics for disadvantaged children over increased curricular enrichment typical in affluent schools? Or is there a problem with schools in low-income communities being committed “to a just world” like at Sidwell Friends or learning “to change the world” like at Georgetown Day School? Are adverse top-down reforms the norm because they actually hit schools in low-income communities the hardest and wreak the least havoc for schools in upper-income communities? Or is the real issue related to the corporate desire to increasingly privatize schools, which includes whittling away at the countervailing forces of teacher unions? The potential uses of the crisis rhetoric against schools is definitely conducive to an immense variety of for-profit predatory schemes.

I also imagine the school reform orthodoxy provides political elites with a certain psychological comfort. Not only does the orthodoxy allow them to pose in the media as virtuous accountabilists

(tough on “failing” schools), but it instills the belief that the educational crisis is harming both disadvantaged children and the economy. Thus, the more elites manage to believe in their own rhetoric, the better they must feel about their actual legislative actions. If my argument is correct, then it’s *their* actions that are harming both disadvantaged children (their educational opportunities and well-being) as well as the overall economy since plutocratic policies tend to diminish our society’s aggregate demand and increase debt among the majority (not to mention generate increased instability and suffering among most of the population). The educational specter must be an attractive defense mechanism for elites committed to representing the corporate donor class at the expense of the population.

“A century ago, two centuries ago, three centuries ago and all the way back to the Bronze Age [3000 BCE to 1200 BCE], almost every society has realized that the great destabilizing force is finance—that is, debt. Debt grows exponentially, enabling creditors ultimately to foreclose on the assets of debtors. Creditors end up reducing societies to debt bondage, as when the Roman Empire ended in serfdom.”³⁵²

Michael Hudson

I also imagine elites losing this comfort if critiques of the school reform orthodoxy—those exposing it as a sham—start resonating in the body politic. Berliner’s and Gene Glass’s book, *50 Myths & Lies That Threaten America’s Public Schools* is a perfect example of the type of critique needed in this regard.

³⁵² Hudson, M. (2019, November 12). *How finance behaves like a parasite toward the economy*. Evonomics. <https://evonomics.com/how-financial-parasites-and-debt-bondage/>

The question is: How could we disseminate this type of critique in other ways to amplify it as an intercession that moves thought in the body politic? Popular books (as well as talks and interviews given about them) are far more effective intercessions than scholarly articles in obscure journals, but more pathways for public impact are still desperately needed. As Ravitch makes clear in her 2020 book, *Slaying Goliath: The Passionate Resistance to Privatization and the Fight to Save America's Public Schools*, this is a David vs. Goliath battle. The resistance to the school reform orthodoxy needs to unleash a multitude of Davids. It needs to catalyze waves of direct and indirect resistance.

In any case, the school reform orthodoxy is a propagandistic coup, particularly since it has captured public opinion, the conventional wisdom, the hegemonic common sense to such an extent that the body politic might even be viewed as an inadvertent protector of this ideology. Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* suggests that, when mobilized, the body politic is the best form of democratic leverage against political elites abusing their power at the expense of the vast majority or oppressed groups. But, as history teaches us, the body politic can also be mobilized to protect the status quo against the majority's own interests. History teaches us that elites depend on crisis rhetoric, war, scapegoating, and nationalism for that very purpose—all features consistent with the educational specter. That Machiavellian maneuver describes what's been happening in the realm of public education and it's incumbent on schools of education to lead the counter-mobilization of the body politic in the pursuit of truth and the Common Good.

I think Paulo Freire, nearly fifty years ago, accurately described the situation that exists today. In *Education for Critical Consciousness* from 1973, Freire wrote: “A massified society is one in which the people... have been manipulated by the elite into an *unthinking, manageable agglomeration*; this process is called massification”³⁵³ [my italics].

If only scholars from various academic disciplines teamed up to study what massification has done to us as a society in just the last four decades. What has it done to our collective thinking and how has that, in turn, degraded our political-economic system? How has massification increasingly enfeebled our potential to mobilize one another for interceding against injustice and oppression? The implications go way beyond schools.

Freire’s view stands in stark contrast to another view of the body politic. In 1820, President Jefferson famously wrote: “I know of no safe repository for the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to increase their discretion by education.”³⁵⁴

Jefferson’s vision reflects the enlightened body politic protecting society from corruption and the abuse of power through democratic action; pressuring elites to respond to the will of the people, the *demos*. That makes sense since democracy is meaningless if it doesn’t lead to improving general societal

³⁵³ Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness* (Vol. 1). Bloomsbury Publishing.

³⁵⁴ Smithsonian American Art Museum. (1820). *I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but*. <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/i-know-no-safe-depository-ultimate-powers-society-658>

well-being. It's also unjust if that improvement comes at the expense of oppressed, marginalized groups, which has often been the case in the United States (the New Deal's exclusion of Black Americans comes to mind. Strange that one of our society's greatest examples of egalitarian reform might not have passed if it were applied equally to Black Americans).

But Jefferson might not have considered the power of massification. That is, the people can be 'educated' through the dissemination of political rhetoric, elite-framings, and disinformation—in this case, by what I refer to in the realm of education as the school reform orthodoxy. This is where Machiavellian politics turns Jefferson's enlightenment ideal on its head.

“Social movement activists need to fight a public relations battle.”³⁵⁵

Francis L.F. Lee

Further, what happens when the mainstream media uncritically amplifies this ideology for decades? What happens when academia tends *not* to counter this propaganda with evidence-based refutations and critiques that resonate in the public mind? What happens when academia does not collectively apply its intelligence to the problem of disseminating critical knowledge so that it impacts public thinking? What happens when schools of education neglect teaching educators about the real history of the Sputnik hysteria, the manipulations of *ANAR*, the suppression of the Sandia Report, the endless recycling of the specter of educational crisis, and, most paradoxically, how 'school

³⁵⁵ Lee, F. L. (Ed.). (2018). *Media, Mobilization and the Umbrella Movement*. Routledge.

accountability' is actually about the evasion of accountability at the top? And what happens when that evasion continually fuels more disruption of academic trajectories in the nation's youth?

I think what happens is what's been happening since the start of 'the permanent way'. The body politic becomes the "safe repository" for elite deceptions. And 'the permanent way' of K-12 educational reforms continues no matter how often elites manipulate the public through disinformation or how damaging or disastrous top-down policies are for America's schools, particularly those serving disadvantaged students. It seems the body politic will keep falling into patterns of inadvertent elite activism or acquiescence to elite agendas until enough interventions against these abuses of power shift our collective thinking in new directions.

If those interventions fail to resonate in the public mind (or stay locked, for the most part, within academia), then we'll continue to inhabit an increasingly propaganda-saturated post-truth society with strong currents of anti-intellectualism and an atrophied sense of interceding with what's happening in our society. And though critiques circulating inside academia might be published in 'high-impact' journals, they won't count for much outside of small groups of scholar-activists (contemplating a downward cultural spiral with minimal interruptions).

Ironically, the school reform orthodoxy blinds the public to the very factors that negatively affect child well-being, student learning, and student achievement rates. Thus, like a self-generating system, the more effective the orthodoxy is at turning the body politic into a "safe repository" for elite deceptions,

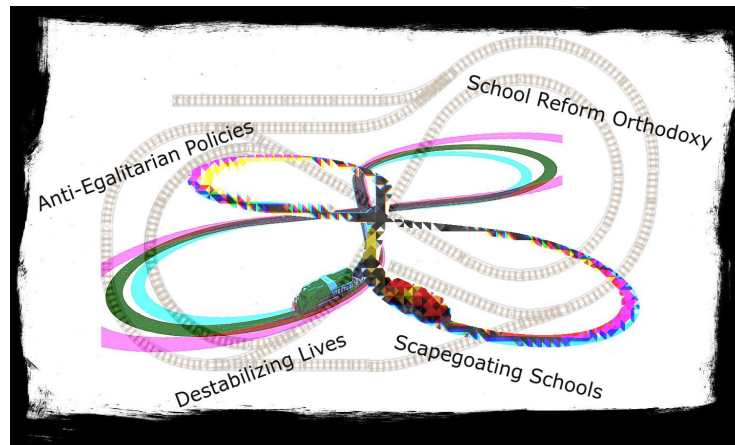
the greater license granted to elites for representing their real constituency (i.e., corporate wealth and power) at the expense of the vast majority—and to do so without fearing political repercussions. If that representation translates into anti-egalitarian policies, as it often does, then the feedback loop of that system becomes more destabilizing. It further destabilizes our society and widens the pathways for poverty and family stress to get under the skin of our children—disrupting their physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development. That vicious cycle increases socioeconomic disadvantages (SEDs) and adverse childhood experiences (ACE) in a complex fashion that’s difficult to summarize in compelling ways and yet easy for society to just ignore. Those disruptive, systemic effects on academic trajectories can then be exploited to reinforce the orthodoxy. That’s how the ‘train’ keeps moving.

I suspect that we won’t be escaping this self-amplifying feedback loop, this self-generating system, and ‘the permanent way’ of reforms until we find ways of increasing the resonance of critiques in our collective thinking. How long will that take? When will critical thresholds be reached? So much depends on academia’s appetite or desire to fight for an enlightened body politic. *To see that fight as part of their mission.*

There’s also the question of how often this self-generating system linked to America’s perverse exceptionalism will be exploited by political demagoguery, which happened in such an outlandish fashion in 2016.

“Biden repeated his earlier remarks [to wealthy donors] that he didn’t want to ‘demonize’ the wealthy and added that, though ‘income inequality’ is a problem that must be addressed, under his presidency, ‘no one’s standard of living will change, nothing will fundamentally change.’ He went on: ‘I need you very badly. I hope if I win this nomination, I won’t let you down.’”³⁵⁶

Andrew Prokop at *Vox*



Vicious Synergy Express, 2021

³⁵⁶ Prokop, A. (2019, June 19). *Joe Biden’s controversial comments about segregationists and wealthy donors, explained*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/6/19/18690910/biden-fundraiser-controversy-segregationists-donors>

Essay 11: Conclusion, The Trim Tab & Small Acts

“I beg you... to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”³⁵⁷

Rainer Maria Rilke

“There are many ways to wallow in the everyday devolution.”³⁵⁸

David Remnick

“Inspiring hope in a cynical world might be the most radical thing you can possibly do. Hope may not feed us, but it is hope that sustains us.”³⁵⁹

Jacqueline Novogratz

“And, for me, hope is telling it like it is no matter how difficult or uncomfortable that may be.”³⁶⁰

Greta Thunberg

Doubtless, this bleak assessment of the state of K-12 educational reforms prompts one to think about the possibilities of *interceding*, of *intervening* to stop default neutrality towards the school reform

³⁵⁷ Popova, M. (2016, October 22). *Live the questions: Rilke on embracing uncertainty and doubt as a stabilizing force*. Brain Pickings. <https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/06/01/rilke-on-questions/>

³⁵⁸ Remnick, D. (2019, July 9). *Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's historic win and the future of the democratic party*. The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/07/23/alexandria-ocasio-cortezs-historic-win-and-the-future-of-the-democratic-party>

³⁵⁹ Popova, M. (2015, September 18). *Live the questions: Jacqueline Novogratz's advice to graduates*. Brain Pickings. <https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/05/29/jacqueline-novogratz-gettysburg-commencement/>

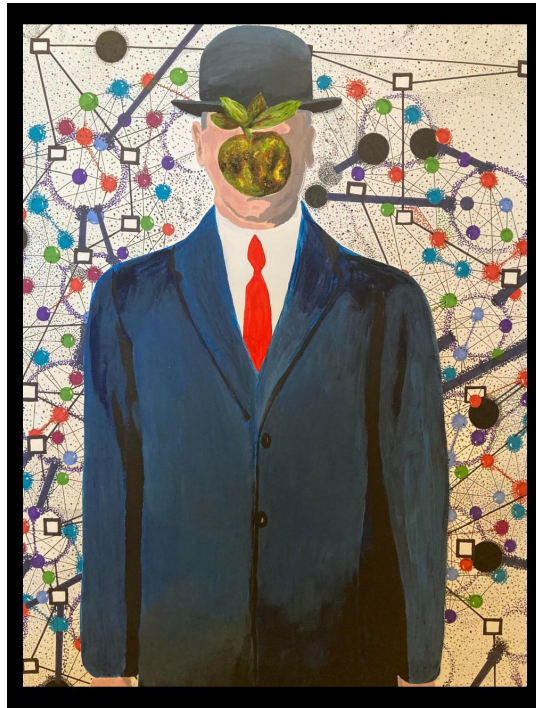
³⁶⁰ Thunberg, G. (2021, January 25). *Greta Thunberg's message to world leaders at #DavosAgenda*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/greta-thunberg-message-to-the-davos-agenda/>

orthodoxy, and gradually turning ‘the permanent way’ of K-12 educational reforms into what is described in railroad terminology as a *dead-end siding*.

But first, a note on what readers might be feeling toward a bleak assessment of what’s been happening. One of the best professors I’ve had in all my years at four different graduate schools of education has stressed to me the need for ending on hopeful signs and solutions. As much as that notion speaks to me I think it’s worth pointing out ‘the permanent way’ of top-down solutions have been built mostly through the manipulation of our collective emotions, particularly through crisis rhetoric, fear-mongering, scapegoating, and whipping up nationalistic fervor. Powerful elites undoubtedly understand how to use our collective vulnerabilities against us. Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* teaches us that lesson. Political elites are so audacious they’ll even unleash the educational specter in the wake of a global financial crisis clearly caused by “bad behavior”³⁶¹ in the FIRE sector (Finance, Insurance, Real Estate); not bad SAT or PISA scores.

From that perspective, we might want to reflect for a moment on the emotional desire for hopeful signs and solutions that put one’s mind at ease in this regard. I suspect that as a society we might make greater progress resisting different types of elite manipulations—in the realm of education and elsewhere—if we develop habits of *ambiguity tolerance* so that we’re less susceptible to the need for simplistic solutions, formulaic framings, elite-friendly narratives, top-down prescriptions, tidy resolutions, quick-fixes, and establishment ideas.

³⁶¹ Stiglitz, J. E. (2010). Lessons from the global financial crisis of 2008. *Seoul Journal of Economics*, 23 (3).https://www8.gsb.columbia.edu/faculty/jstiglitz/sites/jstiglitz/files/2010_Lessons_Global_Financial_Crisis_Seoul.pdf



Back to Complexity, 2020

To use my own painting as an example (an homage to Rene Magritte's *Son of Man*), we have to stop *turning our backs* to complexity and having simple images foisted in front of us to dominate our perceptions (like 'bad apple' teachers); rather, the body politic needs to turn around and face the puzzling nature of situational and systemic complexity.

For example, the public needs to get curious about how poverty gets under the skin of disadvantaged children in our society rather than put off, burdened, or depressed by such a topic. In a society that covets instant gratification and distraction we need to find ways to confront our illiteracies—like the disinclination to understand economic policies—otherwise we set ourselves up for continuing manipulations that negatively impact our lives (and perhaps fuel the desire for more distractions). All

of these *solutions* require that we anticipate, and even learn to embrace, heterodox ruptures in our thinking, cognitive strain, anxiety, confusion, perplexity, and cognitive dissonance. Those emotions can set us up for massification (“to protect us from the painful job of thinking”³⁶²) unless we treat them like opportunities for slow, critical thinking that will benefit our growth.

“In situations that are perceived as emergencies, and particularly ones that are perceived as life-threatening, there is a tendency in social systems to drastically reduce ambiguity and complexity and fall back on a form of very simplistic, black-and-white, totalitarian thinking.”³⁶³

Alfonso Montuori

“Along with a top-down manipulation of public opinion through propaganda, there can also be a bottom-up response that embodies totalitarian thinking and discourse, and demands a totalitarian response from leadership. A totalitarian response may self-organize by tapping into a population’s fears and anxieties, which spark a perceived need for clear, decisive, unambiguous and simple solutions as a form of anxiety alleviation and complexity reduction.”³⁶⁴

Alfonso Montuori

I’m reminded of Alain de Botton’s thoughtful video-essay on Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher known for deconstruction theory, from Botton’s *The School of Life* channel on YouTube. In that essay, Botton says: “Being confused and uncertain... isn’t a sign of weakness or stupidity. It is for Derrida the central mark of maturity. Derrida’s tactic was to glamorize this condition and to give it a positive ring,

³⁶² Johnson, A. (2017, July 14). *When thinking is too painful, apply the conventional view*. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/a7a1c9a0-6661-11e7-8526-7b38dcaef614>

³⁶³ Montuori, A. (2005). How to make enemies and influence people: Anatomy of the anti-pluralist, totalitarian mindset. *Futures*, 37(1), 18-38.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

which is why he brought back into use a beautiful Greek word: *aporia*, meaning impasse or puzzlement. He was proposing *aporia* as a state we should feel proud to know and to visit on a regular basis. Confusion and doubt were not embarrassing dead ends in the Derridean world view. They're simply evidence of the adulthood of the mind."³⁶⁵

“The conventional view serves to protect us from the painful job of thinking.”³⁶⁶

John Kenneth Galbraith

“One can think reflectively only when one is willing to endure suspense and to undergo the trouble of searching.”³⁶⁷

John Dewey

It's not that hopeful signs and positive solutions are problematic desires or goals. It's that, collectively, we need to celebrate ambiguity tolerance and the dissonance of *aporia* as part of the process as we delve into these issues and search for ways to intercede, points of leverage over systemic problems, new approaches for raising consciousness, and ways to mobilize others in our efforts to affect positive social change. This is especially important when powerful elites use propaganda to manipulate our emotions in ways that promote subservient mentalities.

³⁶⁵ The School of Life. (2016, September 2). *Philosophy: Jacques Derrida*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0tnHr2dqTs&t=479s>

³⁶⁶ Johnson, A. (2017, July 14). *When thinking is too painful, apply the conventional view*. Financial Times.
<https://www.ft.com/content/a7a1c9a0-6661-11e7-8526-7b38dcaef614>

³⁶⁷ Dewey, J. (1985). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. D C Heath & Co.

Personally, I've had to be patient living with these paradoxical questions and my own obsession to understand what is happening in the realm of K-12 educational reforms. This patience and determination has come at a high personal cost—financially, emotionally, in terms of relationships, my time for unwinding, my availability as a father and husband (until my marriage fell apart). *In systems, everything affects everything else.* If our working lives and institutions don't make it easier for us to pursue these intellectual riddles and oppressive perplexities then we leave it to individuals to cope as best they can in the harsh wilderness. In those lonely spaces, we need to know how to *sit* with our anxiety as we “live” our way into clearer and fuller answers.

But I hope I do have some answers worth contemplating and fighting for in these concluding remarks.

If Berliner's and Bracey's vigilant fight against the school reform orthodoxy since at least the 1990s is any indication of the durability of 'the permanent way' (how it seems impervious to critiques due to the difficulty of moving thought in the body politic), then this fight needs to be viewed in terms of decades—collective struggles on a variety of issues requiring long-term vision. The same could be said of Freire's struggle against oppression, injustice, top-down cultures, neoliberalism, and the abuse of power in our society and the world from the 1960s to the end of the last century. The same could be said of Zinn's inspiring activism from the 1950s to 2010. And Chomsky's tireless activism against the same forces from the 1960s to the present. *He's still doing interviews on politics in his 90s!* What do all of these critical luminaries have in common? What stands out to me is the attempt to intercede against what is happening in the world by speaking truth to the propagandized populace and with

communities of common concern—whether or not these thinkers are ignored by the mainstream media.

How do we amplify and multiply similar intercessions? How can this fight against massification and the body politic unknowingly being turned into the “safe repository” of elite deceptions best proceed in the 2020s? How do we challenge that hegemonic common sense that’s been deposited into our collective thinking? How do we build cultural resonance into those intercessions so they can disrupt ‘the permanent way’ or bring about its dead-end siding?

“You are the answer. Mass movements are the answer. Millions of people are the answer.”³⁶⁸

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

What seems clear to me is that our struggles need to be focused on raising consciousness in the public mind and building a bottom-up movement that gradually, systemically, alters the mental models (e.g., assumptions, biases, pictures of the world) in our collective thinking, shifting thought in the body politic in more accurate, truthful, and critical directions.

This is currently happening in an unprecedented manner in terms of the Black Lives Matter movement against systemic racism and police brutality. According to Pew Research surveys in 2020, 88 to 92

³⁶⁸ Ocasio-Cortez, A. (2020, September 22). In *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/OcasioCortez/posts/3274961719261156>

percent of *Democrat* and *Leaning Democratic* voters support the movement.³⁶⁹ The movement is in the process of altering our mental models and, like the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, images and videos of police violence have been integral to that belief-altering process, which could lead to real systemic changes. I suspect long-term changes might depend in part on how the Black Lives Matter movement *moves* thought in our collective thinking about the issues involved; how it affects people both within the movement and on the outskirts of it. Perhaps it becomes a question of the strength of social contagion at each degree of separation from the movement.

One could also reflect on the shift underway in our collective thinking in terms of recognizing the U.S. economy as *rigged* against ordinary people, as evidenced by the energy generated among young voters for Senator Bernie Sanders's egalitarian platform in his last two presidential bids. It could also be seen in Pew's report in 2020 that "70% of Americans say [the] U.S. economic system unfairly favors the powerful."³⁷⁰ That's a public sentiment corroborated by research and reminds me of the inchoate discontent felt in the 1980s—exploited by *ANAR*.³⁷¹

Just searching the internet, one senses that the words 'rigged economy' are definitely gaining traction in our culture's lexicon, but will they be exploited by demagogues (as they were in 2016) or fleshed out by

³⁶⁹ Thomas, D., & Horowitz, J. M. (2020, September 16). *Support for Black Lives Matter has decreased since June but remains strong among Black Americans*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/16/support-for-black-lives-matter-has-decreased-since-june-but-remains-strong-among-black-americans/>

³⁷⁰ Igielnik, R. (2020, January 9). *70% of Americans say U.S. economic system unfairly favors the powerful*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/01/09/70-of-americans-say-u-s-economic-system-unfairly-favors-the-powerful/>

³⁷¹ Gilens, M., & Page, B. I. (2014). Testing theories of American politics: Elites, interest groups, and average citizens. *Perspectives on politics*, 12(3), 564-581.

critical thinkers challenging the status quo? I suspect the mainstream media's failure in its role as the Fourth Estate makes the former a more likely outcome in future elections.

In a similar vein (since these issues are connected), this type of shift in our collective thinking needs to happen in terms of understanding the truth about 'the permanent way' of K-12 educational reforms. The truth is essentially out there (spelled out in so many critiques), but too few are connecting with it and it's drowned out by media-amplified propaganda. Thus, demassification is needed on this issue in order to gradually alter the prevailing mental models in our culture. If that happens, we'll move our society in the direction of generating public pressure on politicians to abandon the duplicitous aims of the reform orthodoxy as well as the top-down, anti-democratic nature of K-12 reforms that make public schools—particularly those serving disadvantaged students—look and function less and less like many affluent schools.

“There are those who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge; that is Curiosity. There are those who seek knowledge to be known by others; that is Vanity. There are those who seek knowledge in order to serve; that is Love.”³⁷²

Bernard of Clairvaux

If demassification doesn't occur and the public remains the “safe repository” of elite deceptions, then what? Then the status quo continues to self-generate. Then, evidence-based refutations and critiques

³⁷² Goodreads. (2021). *A quote by Bernard of Clairvaux*. Goodreads, Inc. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/285961-there-are-those-who-seek-knowledge-for-the-sake-of>

against the reform orthodoxy will continue to be generated in academia, but they will largely remain *non-intervening interventions* circulating in ‘high-impact’ journals that few people read. *And what’s the point of furthering that tradition; that institutional norm?* What’s the point of advancing knowledge in academia for the *sake of knowledge* as an abstract virtue if it’s ignored whenever it conflicts with plutocratic agendas? Doesn’t that ‘neutrality’ preserve the worst aspects of the status quo? Doesn’t that make those worst aspects more difficult to change over time? Isn’t that one reason why the New Deal’s response to the Great Depression is so different—far *more* egalitarian—compared to the federal government’s response to the global financial crisis in 2008, the Great Recession, or the Coronavirus recession in 2020? This is what happens—the current status quo—when the body politic has been trained to think like an “unthinking, manageable agglomeration.”³⁷³

Isn’t there something similar going on with the Republican Party’s dismissal of global warming as a problem and the weakness of the Democratic Party’s support for the Green New Deal? In response to the former, scientists-turned-activists organized the March for Science in 2017, holding protests and rallies worldwide emphasizing principles such as public outreach, serving the Common Good, and “[evidence] based policy and regulations in the public interest.”³⁷⁴ One of the organizers, Caroline Weinberg, said, “An American government that ignores science to pursue ideological agendas endangers the world.”³⁷⁵

³⁷³ Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness* (Vol. 1). Bloomsbury Publishing.

³⁷⁴ March for Science. (n.d.). *Principles and goals*.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170318183426/https://www.marchforscience.com/mission-and-vision>

³⁷⁵ Ahuja, M. (2017, January 26). *Scientists planning their own march in Washington*. CNN.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/25/politics/scientists-march-dc-trnd/index.html>

“It’s not enough to just study and report on the fossil fueled climate changes that are occurring. I must now sound the alarm, and protect human civilization from climate breakdown. And not just me. All of us who have the information, also have a duty to sound the alarm and share what we know. .. I still love teaching and research, but I’ve come to understand that it is activism, sharing what we know, and speaking out that will change the world.”³⁷⁶

Heather Price

Weinberg’s statement is the kind of bold language needed in the fight against the reform orthodoxy in the popular culture. It’s needed from tech-savvy deans and other leaders in schools of education.

Unlike the crisis rhetoric espoused by elites, these scientist-activists aren’t being hyperbolic about the environmental crisis. These ideological agendas—tied to the wishes of our political parties’ corporate donors—are endangering the entire world and there’s only a certain amount of years left to avert disaster on a global level. (That’s why Chomsky has called the U.S. Republican Party “the most dangerous organization in human history.”³⁷⁷)

The school reform orthodoxy is also about the abuse of state-corporate power. Reformers have not only imposed educational malpractice on our society’s children for decades (especially the most disadvantaged), but the orthodoxy is about deflecting attention from plutocratic agendas—policies that threaten the well-being of children and the economic security of the vast majority in our society.

³⁷⁶ Price, H. (2019, September 14). From climate scientist to climate activist. The Esperanza Project. <https://www.esperanzaproject.com/2019/climate-change/from-climate-scientist-to-climate-activist/#:%7E:text=It's%20not%20enough%20to%20just,and%20share%20what%20we%20know>.

³⁷⁷ Chomsky, N. (2018, November 5). *Noam Chomsky on midterms: Republican party is the “most dangerous organization in human history.”* Democracy Now! https://www.democracynow.org/2018/11/5/noam_chomsky_on_midterms_republican_party

If my argument is correct, then doesn't it warrant bold responses—not 'neutrality' or business-as-usual mindsets—from every school of education?

It's also worth noting that Pasi Sahlberg, the Finnish education scholar, often warns that the school reform orthodoxy—what he refers to as G.E.R.M. (the Global Education Reform Movement)—has *infected* many societies other than the U.S. and England. (Finns found a way to *inoculate* themselves against it—throwing a huge monkey wrench into G.E.R.M. thinking since their educational system isn't exam-oriented and it's considered one of the best in the world.) So, there's even a global dimension to the use of school accountability as a way of helping elites avoid accountability for anti-egalitarian policies that undermine human health, security, and happiness across the world.

I once jokingly asked Pasi Sahlberg at the Askwith Forum at Harvard if Finland offers asylum for
American teachers.

I suspect there might not be more valuable scapegoats for governments than the ones that facilitates Richistan economics.

And so, how do we fight against the massification that buys our acquiescence? How do we fight against default 'neutrality' generating subservient unthinking and unintended elite activism? How do we disseminate resonant critiques that ripple out into the wider culture? At first, those questions bring me to that state of aporia—I'm bewildered, pessimistic (because our institutions are so unresponsive to

our needs), searching for ways to be realistic and yet life-affirming and bold. Searching for ways to think about how “small acts,” as Zinn famously said, could, “when multiplied by millions... transform the world.”³⁷⁸ Which small acts are most needed against massification in the decade of the 20s? Against the school reform orthodoxy? How best to amplify and multiply these acts? How to brainstorm like a systems thinker about points of leverage and fundamental solutions that self-generate? In this situation, where are the *trim tabs*—to use systems language—that might produce catalytic effects in the thought of the body politic? How I wish I could devote my life to thinking about these issues in communities of common concern (rather than after long days of stressful work and then mostly in isolation).

Despite that bewilderment, I do feel that reaching that critical threshold in the body politic requires a paradigm shift in academic behavior and values in terms of the dissemination of critical knowledge to the public. I believe academia will essentially need to take on the role of the Fourth Estate alongside independent, critical news outlets because the latter cannot carry that torch alone. One might argue that the protection of the vestiges of democracy in our society—or democracy’s resuscitation—depends on the strength of such synergy in the decades to come.

Some might wonder how academia can take on that vacated role (the ‘neutrality’ bias speaking through them), but the truth is it’s happening all the time. It might not be happening through academia as a

³⁷⁸ Zinn, H. (2007). *A power governments cannot suppress*. City Lights Books.

collective entity, but it is practiced through the public pedagogy of scholar-activists and public intellectuals. Consider the activism of the critical luminaries mentioned earlier.

Consider Diane Ravitch's popular books, Op-eds, blogs, TV interviews, speeches, and participation in protests since changing her mind about the merit of educational reforms with the release of the zeitgeist capturing book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*.

On the environmental crisis, consider Naomi Klein's books, films, speeches, TV and podcast interviews, and journalism for mainstream and independent news outlets.

On economic issues, consider economists like Robert Reich, Yanis Varoufakis, and Michael Hudson.

On Instagram alone, Reich has more than half a million followers. His latest book is called *The System: Who Rigged it, How We Fix It*. He has two documentaries out. He's written 18 books, some of which have been bestsellers.

On systemic racism and prison reform, consider Patrisse Cullors, one of the co-founders of the Black Lives Matter movement, who is an educator, author, artist (performance art, dance, theater), and speaker in forums beyond academia.

On a wide range of political issues, consider Cornel West’s and Tricia Rose’s podcast *The Tight Rope* along with their popular books, talks, interviews on mainstream and independent news outlets, and videos (and West’s spoken word albums).

These are the pathways for recreating the Fourth Estate in the decades to come. Imagine what those pathways could be with institutions widening them and taking collective stances on their own.

What’s needed is *more*—more public outreach, more resonant critiques rippling outward, more protests. Is it unrealistic to hope that academia could increasingly embrace the vacated role of the Fourth Estate in the 2020s? Are these institutions too corporatized or could they learn from those critical luminaries, trailblazers, moral agents of change, and others about using knowledge to serve the Common Good in desperate times? Academia already invests its collective intelligence in generating solutions to societal problems and critiques of the status quo. What’s stopping academia from investing more of its collective intelligence in the *art of disseminating* that knowledge so that it has a better chance of being applied in the real world to serve the public interest? For example, what’s stopping institutions like M.I.T. from disseminating knowledge to the public so it can actually “bear on the world’s great challenges”³⁷⁹ whether or not it conforms to plutocratic agendas? What’s stopping schools of education from *interceding* like the scientist-activists who organized the March for Science, which has led to massive protests in major cities across the U.S. and the world since 2017?

³⁷⁹ MIT. (2020). *MIT facts 2020: Mission*. <https://web.mit.edu/facts/mission.html>

Personally, I believe schools of education are perfectly positioned for interceding against what has been happening to public education *and* the economic dimensions of our lives, but are they willing to take on a vanguard role in academia to fight against the price our society has paid for being emotionally vulnerable to the specter of educational crisis? That price is the high societal cost of America's perverse exceptionalism among industrialized nations—such as skyrocketing income inequality, stagnant wages for a shrinking middle-class, a growing low-wage sector, weakened social mobility rates, the toxic effects of poverty on brain development, tens of thousands of lives lost annually to inadequate health care... That's a glimpse at the real crises hidden behind the manufactured one parasitizing the public mind so that it acts against its own interests. That price has been extremely high for those hit hardest by the insidious effects of poverty and every calamity and affliction associated with it. That price has been paid by us to help build the “billionaires’ paradise.”³⁸⁰ That's what Richistan economics is really about.

“The paradise of the rich is made out of the hellof the poor.”³⁸¹

Victor Hugo

I also think schools of education bear some responsibility for what has happened since the 1980s—the acceleration of plutocratic agendas. Will these schools be interested to look closely, thoughtfully, and critically at the role they've played since the federal government cleverly anointed America's schools as

³⁸⁰ Eskow, R. (2017, November 13). *Why we need to confront the billionaires' paradise*. Common Dreams. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2017/11/13/why-we-need-confront-billionaires-paradise>

³⁸¹ Hugo, V. (2021). *A quote from the man who laughs*. Gooreads, Inc. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/374786-the-paradise-of-the-rich-is-made-out-of-the>

society's 'best means' for addressing the problems that *elites* were busy creating or neglecting? Or will schools of education dismiss the idea that their response—or lack of response—to our nation's drift toward the capitalist oligarchies of Russia, Mexico, and Brazil is related to the endlessly recycled specter of educational crisis? I have no doubt that such a critical self-examination would only make these institutions stronger and more responsive to the *demons*, the people. Which groups do they really want to serve? What are their core values?

Perhaps I have stumbled upon the solution I wish to single out in these concluding remarks. I'll focus on schools of education even though I have several of the social science disciplines in mind. I believe schools of education could be academia's vanguard for once in their long history if they chose to lead the counter-mobilization of the body politic against the school reform orthodoxy and the plutocratic agendas it supports. If what's needed from academia is more public pedagogy challenging the status quo, then perhaps the trim tab worth fighting for is a simple shift in academic priorities. Let's pressure and persuade schools of education to *measure success* not by how well scholars and students conform to APA-formatted academese or how often they publish in journals called 'high-impact' by their advocates when that impact is often limited to the Ivory Tower (or just careers inside it).

Instead, let's measure success by scholars' and students' effort to communicate research and critiques to wider audiences both inside and beyond academia. Let's measure success by their creativity in coming up with new ways of translating research and making critiques resonate in the public mind. *Making critical insights stick in our collective unconscious—altering our mental models and thus altering thinking*

more generally. Let's measure success by how well they teach the public about the truth of what's been happening to America's schools in the past four decades and how it's connected to a veiled economic assault on our lives.

In essence, let's aim for *public impact* over *esoteric impact* in obscure journals. Let's celebrate that shift as an institutional nudge to fight for the type of world we want to inhabit.

If that proposition is too radical for leadership to embrace, then why not give scholars and students the democratic option of two different pathways: one for advancing knowledge in the traditional sense and another for disseminating knowledge to the public—some may even excel at both (think of Berliner's example). But there's no doubt that the latter represents the type of intercessions needed to challenge massification and the oppressive status quo. For those who value this metric, there's no doubt in my mind which pathway the most cited book in education, Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, would recommend if it were updated for the new century. As educators, we only need to look to our own traditions and luminaries—at figures like Dewey and Friere and Bracey—to know the right moral actions at this moment.

And what might those intercessions look like in the near future? That's the *positive* side of puzzlement and bewilderment—and the magic of Zinn's words: "small acts." If academia just widened those activist pathways, I believe the bottom-up creativity and synergy unleashed would be astonishing to behold. *Small acts catalyzing wave after wave of other small acts*. I imagine a flurry of book projects

(Nick Sousanis’s comic-dissertation would no longer be an anomaly), digital art, murals, video-essays (using authors like Alain de Botton as guides), documentaries, social media campaigns, free on-line games funding progressive activism, new forums inspired by TED Talks, scholar-activist websites, rap and poetry, animation (think of RSA’s “Changing Education Paradigms”), blogs and podcasts, mass mobilization apps, children’s stories, musical projects, and theater (if Fanshen Cox DiGiovanni’s thesis and multimedia performance, *One Drop of Love*, doesn’t convince academic leaders about the power of advancing knowledge in non-traditional ways I don’t know what will).

I imagine the flourishing of inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches to knowledge. Instead of emphasizing APA formatting I imagine schools focusing attention on tools for formatting *online* theses and dissertations in open databases—no longer relegating these projects to the least visited shelves at a single university library. I imagine formatting tools that easily integrate video, images, and text to increase their chance for resonance. I imagine all research databases not only open to the public, but organized with the expressed aim of raising consciousness in the wider culture. How schools of education have not done this in the wake of NCLB to at least elevate consciousness among teachers is beyond me.

I also imagine the rise in boycotts and protests that resonate like Greta Thunberg’s outside the Swedish parliament. What about outside the Department of Education in Washington D.C.? What about outside the offices of Congressional leaders who keep committing our society to anti-egalitarian, neoliberal, plutocratic, Richistan economics? Imagine the tipping points possible for nationwide

protests once the larger public no longer identifies with the liberal vs. conservative framing our political duopoly reinforces and instead recognizes that the Occupy movement's framing ("We are the 99%"³⁸²) is far more aligned with what is happening in our society.

I imagine scholars and millions of undergraduate and graduate students feeling free to "think, explore, and create"³⁸³ as they experiment with ways to speak truth to the propagandized populace and with communities of common concern. I imagine a "multiplicity of voices"³⁸⁴ reaching the *demos* in unprecedented ways. I imagine the literacy of *interceding* gaining prominence at the expense of test taking literacy. I imagine academia helping to accelerate social movements and protests rather than upholding the virtues of academic insularity and the unwitting elite activism it perpetuates.

At Harvard, I'll never forget how I spent the majority of my time at Lamont Library toiling over one APA-style essay after another; often long into the early morning hours, sitting in isolation at my desk and yet surrounded by other solitary students (alone together) churning out the same.

This image of constant isolation in a silent crowd for long hours struck me as a sad commentary about the state of higher education. After paying so much money for tuition this was how I was spending most of my time? I wanted more time to attend talks, interact, debate, and visit innovative elementary schools in the area; more time for social learning *experiences*, as Dewey

³⁸² Wikipedia contributors. (2021d, March 22). *We are the 99%*. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We_are_the_99%25

³⁸³ Zhao, Y. (2017, September 18). *Fatal attraction: Why copying each other won't improve education?* National Education Policy Center. <https://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/fatal-attraction>

³⁸⁴ Sidwell Friends. (n.d.). *A quaker education - Sidwell friends*. <https://www.sidwell.edu/a-quaker-education>

might recommend. But universities prize analytic essays that mirror scientific articles (the type that bore most non-academics). Furthermore, these endless endeavors in academes were typically for an audience of one, a single person—one of the professor’s teaching fellows. How can that possibly teach one to reach the wider public? These teaching fellows acted more like gatekeepers to the acceptable forms of academic prose. Doesn’t that just train us to accept as normal the *least* amount of public impact from our activities while we pursue our individualistic goals in academia? I suspect there’s a lot of students like me who are just terrible at jumping through those prescribed careerist hoops and then flounder in academia because of it. Is that what the system should be about? Does that reflect the educational spirit most of us truly value?

“Sometimes, the most brilliant and intelligent minds do not shine in standardized tests because they do not have standardized minds.”³⁸⁵

Diane Ravitch

“Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth.”³⁸⁶

Albert Einstein

In essence, academic leaders need to realize that the progressive educational tradition is not only needed in schools in China, Singapore, the U.S., and other societies infected by G.E.R.M. or the reform orthodoxy, but also in our colleges and universities. Imagine what could happen if these

³⁸⁵ Neufeld, J. (2015, January 23). *Parents band together to end a “test-obsessed system.”* Observer. <https://observer.com/2015/01/parents-band-together-to-end-a-test-obsessed-system/>

³⁸⁶ bigthinkeditor. (2019, January 30). *Albert Einstein: Truth is revealed when authority is questioned.* Big Think. <https://bigthink.com/words-of-wisdom/albert-einstein-rebel-scientist>

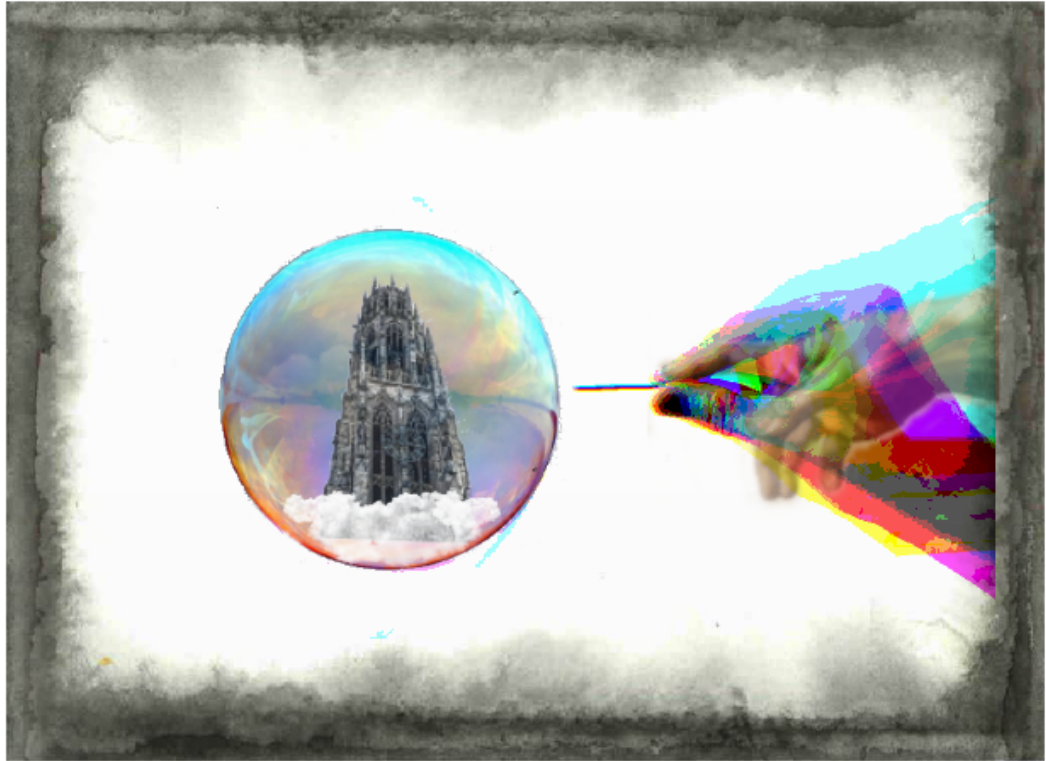
institutions learned how to “amplify students’ voice, agency, conscience, and intellect to create a more equitable, just, and sustainable world,”³⁸⁷ by changing the norms of academic insularity. If that paradigm shift occurred, then every college and university could become a laboratory of experimentation and innovation in terms of the art of disseminating critical knowledge to the public. Is there any better way to mobilize the body politic against all the anti-democratic forces in our plutocratic society and the untold suffering and lost potential those forces produce for millions of people every year and from one decade to the next?

“If we want to re-enchant and empower social science ... then we need to ... drop the fruitless efforts to emulate natural science’s success in producing cumulative and predictive theory ... we must focus on issues of values and power ... we must ... communicate the results of our research to ... citizens. If we do this, we may successfully transform social science from what is fast becoming a sterile academic activity, which is undertaken mostly for its own sake and in increasing isolation from a society on which it has little effect and from which it gets little appreciation.”³⁸⁸

Bent Flyvbjerg

³⁸⁷ Collins, T. (2021). *Harnessing the dynamic power of progressive practice for the next generation of students, schools, and democracy*. Progressive Education Network. <https://progressiveeducationnetwork.org/mission/>

³⁸⁸ Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Cambridge University Press.



Popping the Ivory Bubble, 2021