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Democracy, Capitalism, and Educational Opportunity *From Horace Mann to the Present*

Thomas M. Falk
University of Dayton

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Abstract

The paper considers modern notions of educational opportunity through the ethical and historical lenses of democracy and capitalism in the United States. The culture's contemporary horizons of opportunity grew out of the massive, early-19th century shift from peasant to proletarian economies and lifestyles. Later on, during the Progressive Era, opportunity became wedded to the ethic of consumerism, as well as the meritocratic hierarchies of the corporation, by then the pre-eminent institution of the land. However, another brand of opportunity, deep within our cultural history, entailed the democratization of intelligence and the achievement of a classless society. This alternative vision suggests forms of resistance and reconstruction, perhaps already going on amongst us, that might strengthen the democratic character of our schools and larger modes of associated living.



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“Democracy asserts the fact that the masses are now raised to higher intelligence than formerly. All our civilization now aims at this mark.”

Henry Adams, Democracy, 1879 (Lasch, 64)

“What I want to see above all is that this country remains a country where someone can always get rich. That’s the one thing we have and that must be preserved.”

President Ronald Reagan, 1982 (Wilentz, 135)

“One is far more likely to hear one’s child spoken of as ‘human capital’ than as a citizen in waiting. American public schools have become, above all, a vast, variegated system funneling this human capital into its final destination in the hierarchies of the undemocratic world of modern work.”

Robert Westbrook, “Educating Citizens,” 2005 (Westbrook, 229)

In honor of the 81st anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday, Cornel West addressed an overflowing auditorium at Ohio State University. During a lead-in presentation of awards to a handful of accomplished African-American students, the event’s emcee spoke to the achievements of each recipient, including summary statements of their program of study, grade point average, and future employment. The audience cheered, hearing that one student had just signed a contract to work for Merck, the giant pharmaceutical company; folks applauded after learning of another student’s impending position with Pratt Whitney, where the girl would soon be working as an engineer. These students had “made it” to the promised land of jobs with impressive titles and six-figure salaries. West’s subsequent talk specifically decried the glorification of this type of achievement.

In the tradition of MLK, West condemned our culture’s celebration of individual prestige and pecuniary success. King had little use for those things. His concern, rather, was to bear witness to the suffering poor, to give voice to the terrorized and dispossessed, and most of all to embrace the spiritual bonds of solidarity—purposes largely effaced by the achievement profiles of our magnificent institutions; ethics currently embraced only by the weird.

Well over two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson, the first prophet of meritocracy, proposed the radical notion of identifying and training society’s future leaders through a publicly funded system of education. This wild idea made little sense to folks at the time. Few could yet understand or appreciate the opportunities that would be afforded by a formal education.

Although the term would not find its way into the standard American lexicon until the Great Depression, *social mobility* began to attach itself to public education as early as the Common School period. By the Progressive Era, educational opportunity had become wedded to the growing ethic of consumerism and to the meritocratic hierarchies of the corporation. Even today, as that link has become more than ever tenuous, social mobility and material uplift remain the central promises of academic achievement.

There is, however, another horizon of opportunity, once widely shared by all who called our nation “the last, best hope of Earth.” In sharp contrast to Europe, America offered ordinary (white) folks, peasants, and artisans, the chance to share in the world of culture and learning. Unlike the degraded masses of England, working class Americans traded in the world of ideas,

maintaining a vibrant press and political voice. It was in this intellectual, and not material sense, that foreigners spoke of America as a classless society.

Today, in an age of expanding inequality and deprivation, in which the rungs of the educational ladder are all but rotted away, folks are searching for a spiritual alternative to the once-messianic ideology of capitalist materialism. Such an alternative might be assembled from the rich soil of our democratic legacy, buried just below the surface.

The Educational Frontier

Back in the country's first decade, when Thomas Jefferson proposed his Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, the Virginia peasantry harbored few illusions of improving their children's standing in the world by way of formal schooling. While Jefferson sought to rake 20 geniuses from the rubbish annually, Virginians and other Southerners failed to appreciate the prospects of sending their sons to join the ranks of the elite and ruling class. Men and women sought to get ahead in life, although typically via some other route: trade, agriculture, enterprise, etc.

During its first several generations, the new American nation provided the white, Western world with a beacon of hope. Across the Atlantic, poor Europeans lived amongst both material and intellectual squalor; they were, often consciously, denied access to the arts of the mind: language, literacy, and learning. When entering the public, the working classes muted their voices and bowed their heads. Culture, civics, and politics did not belong to them.

Travelling to America during the early 19th century, foreigners marveled at the inventive, articulate, and self-reliant character of average folk. Highly literate, Americans read voraciously and offered opinions on everything. None bowed their heads as they crossed the paths of their social and economic betters. Despite witnessing great inequalities of wealth and material possession, Tocqueville spoke of America as an almost classless society. The country had not *subjects*, as did France and England, but *citizens*. The people did not need to be governed, wrote Michael Chevalier, because they could govern themselves (Lasch, 60). Despite the prevalence of slavery and the segregation of women from certain spheres of life, the American experiment seemed to offer, to all who were born free, the opportunity to achieve a life of dignity. During the course of the following century, as the national life underwent a revolution, schooling and industry served as arenas in which the brightest hopes of the Western Enlightenment came face to face with the promise of a consumerist utopia.

It is by no happenstance that the Common School movement coincides with the early growth spasms of the Industrial Revolution. In this revolutionary age, liberal reformers, powerfully committed to the ideology of economic and material Progress, struggled mightily to dam the floods of social change. Schooling sought to lubricate the tectonic shift from agrarian to industrial modes of life. Students would enter school doors as peasants and emerge as proletarians.

The greater portion of the once-independent farmers and tradesfolk who had been forced out of the marketplace, by and into large factories, experienced the transition as a degradation of life and radical infringement upon their status as free people (Bowles & Gintis, 155-156). Leaving their homes, families, and communities, workers surrendered to bosses control over the

purposes, conditions, and rhythms of work. Within this constellation, some viewed Mann's schools as institutions through which their employers would next usurp their children.

In overtures to factory owners, Mann insisted that the school would help to invest boys and girls with a sense of naturalness and quietude lacking in their parents. The Common School shift in relations of social reproduction, from mixed-age to age-graded groupings, mirrored the change in relations of material production, from the home and independent shop to the factory. Life for children in school became less like the home and more like the corporation, instilling future workers with a moral economy of discipline, docility, and private ambition (Graff, 26-28).

Thus, in many instances, and although wanting more education for their children, parents opposed public schooling in order to protect their sons and daughters from an institution which they understood to be aligned with the designs of their new masters. This is why, in Beverly, Massachusetts, in the year 1860, more than three-quarters of the town's working population voted against establishing a school. Reformers and industrialists dealt with this resistance in two ways.

When Irish immigrants in the town of Lowell—where the working class constituted less than five percent of school boards—boycotted the public schools, truant officers forcibly hauled children in and arrested recalcitrant parents. Similar incidents occurred across the state and elsewhere (Bowles & Gintis, 163-164). From Minnesota to Nebraska, Kansas, Alabama, North Carolina, and the Dakotas, populist revolts slowed the establishment of schools. Yet resistance eventually gave way, frequently in response to Mann's overtures.

Throughout much of the 19th century, wage work, with an eye toward saving money to start one's own business, could be reconciled with the classical liberal doctrine of freedom. Permanent wagedom, however, was understood widely as a form of slavery. In his addresses to working class audiences, Mann sold his schools as vehicles of uplift. "Education," he stated in 1848, "beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery" (Mann, 1848, as cited in Cremin, 1957). If, as it was becoming increasingly apparent, few would ever graduate to the ranks of independent proprietorship, schooling then offered the next best alternative: social mobility within the hierarchies of industry.

The symbiotic relationship between public schooling and industrial capitalism cannot be undersold. In areas of the country where wage labor had not yet taken hold, few saw reasons for building schools. Yet wherever factories grew up and men and women entered the ranks of wagedom, schools soon followed (Bowles & Gintis, 176-177). Most importantly, schooling helped break young proletarian boys and girls away from the ethics and ambitions of their peasant parents. The Industrial Revolution closed doors to older visions of democracy, namely America as a classless society. As those doors closed, storefront windows opened to display a new galaxy of consumer goods, to which the hierarchies of schools and businesses offered differentiated access.

At the time of the American Revolution, 80 percent of non-enslaved adult males remained independent property owners and proprietors. That number fell to 33 percent by 1880 (59). Prior to the turn of the 20th century it had become apparent that wagedom was a lasting and even permanent condition for most Americans. From that point on, very few ever graduated to the ranks of self-employment. Men and women accepted competing against each other within corporations rather than competing against the corporations themselves. Americans embraced

Taylorism and the consolation prize of consumerism amidst a proliferating commodity culture as salve for the wound of castration inflicted by the wage contract.

At the dawn of the Progressive Era, two educational visions vied for influence over public schools. On one hand, the likes of John Dewey and Jane Addams revived the democratic aims of justice and equity by seeking to extend broad learning and culture to the masses. On the other hand, stability- and efficiency-minded social scientists designed to adjust children to bourgeois society and to sort students for their future roles in industry. It is according to this second vision that intellectual leaders of the American educational establishment would exploit the ideology of Progress. As corporate capitalism eclipsed the older, small-scale, competitive economy, professional administrators and businessmen liquidated nearly all that remained of working-class representation on urban school boards (Carnoy, 3). In reaction to growing populist revolt against the swelling prevalence of wage work and the increasingly clear rigidity of class divisions, the mission of the school grew again in scope and magnitude. Responding to massive labor strikes across the country, capitalists restored order by calling in strikebreakers, Pinkerton thugs, and the National Guard to intimidate, beat, and murder workers. But forward-thinking men such as Andrew Carnegie believed that the true solution to the unrest lay in “education, education, education” (Bowles & Gintis, 18).

In the midst of WWI, Randolph Bourne attacked an American intellectual class that he saw serving as courtiers to the State and its “significant classes.” Just as they had loyally offered up high-minded rationales for entering the war, Bourne’s colleagues boarded the train of social efficiency, which found its ideological architecture in Herbert Spencer’s *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (1860), the country’s most widely read educational treatise by the end of the century. According to Spencer’s doctrine, decisions regarding the aims of education were to be handled by experts and under no circumstances left up to regular folk, all in the interest of the greater social good. Two decades later, Lester Frank Ward rejected Spencer’s Social Darwinism but agreed that the proper function of schools was to identify students’ mental capacities in order to conduct them to commensurate employment (Ward, 1886; Ravitch, 27-29).

By the first decade of the 20th century, Edward Thorndike, David Snedden, and the budding discipline of Educational Psychology had steered the academic mind, along with the bulk of educational research funding, toward the task of social engineering in the name of Progress. In 1906 the Massachusetts Commission on Industrial and Technical Education launched a movement to prepare students for productive efficiency in jobs (Ravitch, 78). 12 years later, the National Education Association published its report titled “Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education,” dismissing the general study of History as useless and defining “good citizenship” as the adjustment of student attitudes to prevailing social conditions. The same report urged high schools to steer girls away from academic subjects in favor of preparation for a lifetime of bondage to household chores (123-129).

Practiced in the strategy of divide and conquer, employers took advantage not only of ranks and pay grades, but also race, gender, religion, and class background to serve as the lines of division. During the 20th century, mental testing and educational credentials became accepted as objective criteria by which schools and businesses could arrange and separate their charges into ever more narrowly defined roles and positions within their hierarchies. The differential rewarding of status, authority, and pay would help to naturalize within the working class its own internal divisions.

Intelligence tests developed by Robert Yerkes and Lewis Terman shrouded racism, sexism, and profit-maximization strategy in the cloak of scientific authority. Between 1921-1936, academic journals published over 4000 articles on mental testing. By 1939, 4300 mental tests were in use in American schools (196). The Carnegie Corporation gave Edward Thorndike \$325 million to develop intelligence tests and categories and in 1948 teamed with Rockefeller to create the now-predominant Educational Testing Service, whose tests today perpetuate and proliferate the same malign divisions and discriminations.

Once the American Frontier closed and education became the new path to the American Dream of personal advancement, race, work ethic, and Intelligence Quotient were held out as the determining factors of deserved success and rightful inequity. Having generations ago been forced out of the marketplace as independent proprietors, average folk knew little else but to look upon school as the primary means to prove their merit and earn favored position within the brave new corporate world.

Twilight of the Meritocracy

The Progressive Era in American history marks the victory of consumerism, and the concomitant defeat of self-government, as the defining element of American culture. Once it appeared to liberal elites that ordinary citizens lacked the competence to contribute to the progress of civilization through popular government, the country embraced the promise of increasing material abundance—universal access to the good things in life—as a consolation prize, and endured Taylorism as a means to achieving it. In many ways, this corrupt bargain paid off. During the second half of the 20th century an unprecedented number of Americans enjoyed a middle-class culture of comfort and convenience. In so doing, the culture also defined its criteria for citizenship in the image of that savage and untamed creature, *homo economicus*.

During WWII, while America's young men fought overseas, its young women worked 70-plus hour weeks inside armaments factories building tanks and fighter planes. Following the war, production remained a guiding ethic of the culture. As Charles Taylor put it, production came to constitute a shared horizon of life's meaning and significance, a central backdrop against which the country could pursue Progress and seek a better future (Taylor, 200-206). Post-WWII America conceived itself as a society of work, a large-scale enterprise of production in which widely diverse functions combined to produce the greater good. This predominantly economic social order offered members a sense of community based in common meanings: the idea of defending a way of life and building a better future for its children. Such a civilization, requiring from individuals an unprecedented level of disciplined, sustained, and monotonous effort, had to be endowed with something beyond mere material significance. "[T]he process of production itself," wrote Joseph Pieper in 1952, "is understood and proclaimed as the activity that gives meaning to human existence" (Pieper, 60). So it was leading up to the cultural revolution of the 1960's.

In 1958, Michael Young's *Rise of the Meritocracy* proffered a dystopian society in which political and economic institutions promote the most worthy, i.e., those deemed the smartest and most productive, into positions of control and influence (Young). Young was later horrified to find that America and Great Britain had actually adopted "rule by the clever" as a social model and thereby abandoned the democratic project of "rule by the people." As in the novel, IQ tests deployed by educational institutions measured what was most important to the American

economy: speed and efficiency, how many problems one could solve and how many operations one could compute within a given frame of time. Rendered at worst invisible, or at best secondary, were qualities such as honesty, cooperation, and imagination. In schools, writes Marcus Raskin,

Students are urged to fulfill an achievement profile of themselves which is primarily derived from requirements and functions set by the colonizer's needs...But even knowing that the records and papers of a system tell us more about the system than the people who are stamped with them, the student seems unable to escape the image created for him—as him—through the hierarchic other...Children in [this] colonized world find themselves on the bed of Procrustes. They are expected to be tools of forces that they cannot see, understand, or control (Raskin, 24).

It should be logically uncontroversial to say that, within capitalist institutions, the finest individuals are those who best serve the needs of capital: productive and efficient workers, congenial but ultimately competitive, habituated to subordination, and ethically quieted regarding the casualties and larger purposes of the enterprise.

Deriving from John Locke, who lived and wrote during a time of labor scarcity, the rules and logics of our capitalist political economy prefigure a spectrum of success and failure. For every man and woman who achieves a decent life, an equal number will struggle with poverty and destitution. “It is only hunger,” Joseph Townsend recognized in 1786, “which can spur and goad [the poor] on to labor” (Townsend). Against this backdrop school and work become contests to acquire those objective markers—SAT scores, degrees, titles, etc.—which provide access to precious commodities such as food, shelter, and sexual partners (Bellah, 43). But the fact is that Western society has long enjoyed a labor surplus. There are now more than enough skilled and willing workers to provide a decent standard of living for all. Yet our inherited logic of scarcity and individualism affords us few alternatives but to persist competing in a war of all against all. Because one small class owns the land and means of production, every advance of automation and globalization threatens our comfort and livelihood. While jobs are sent overseas to be performed by men and women who will accept slave wages so that capital may grow more efficiently, American workers are idled and their children malnourished.

The unpredictable nature of the global economy suggests that no one is in control of the enterprise. Trapped within the vicissitudes of this maddeningly impersonal terrorism, the working class divides against itself. Isolated from our fellow producers by an atavistic, competitive ideology, we become angry and afraid. Demagogues offer up immigrants and ethnic minorities as easy targets against whom to direct our rage. Hatred breeds itself as resurgent racism, nativism, and xenophobia, all of which give outlet to the people's legitimate yet tragically misguided grievances. But the empirical fact is that there is plenty to go around; we only need a strategy for more intelligently, i.e., democratically, organizing our selves and efforts. Doing so will require us to purge the ideologies of scarcity and competitive individualism that infect both the school and larger society.

Born into the role of the beast of burden whose life purpose is to toil for the enlargement of capital, the laborer is given license to strive individually for success as a means to satisfying his carnal desires and escaping his condition of wagedom. Each step taken and every turn of Ixion's wheel made according to the horizons of *success* afforded by our political economy serve

only to strengthen capital and intensify working class exploitation. The same horizons and consequences of *academic achievement* plague our schools.

There is a culture of competition in American schools and this is not an entirely bad thing (Goldman & McDermott). Competition can be an invaluable pedagogical tool for spurring fruitful learning activity. However, we must realize that, equal to the larger economy, schooling prefigures a spectrum of success and failure. Standardized tests, the gate-keeping instruments to higher-education credentials, are calibrated to produce a distribution of outcomes: a small cohort of winners supported by a vast pool of also-rans. Schools “cool-out” the doomed by convincing them that, according to a fair and just system, they do not have what it takes to achieve a comfortable life and thus deserve to remain mired in the dregs of wagedom. Moreover, while students from wealthy districts will not likely suffer greatly when they graduate in the bottom half of their classes or score below the 50th percentile on the SAT, the success of all those fortunate children comes at the expense of children from other schools, in other communities, where academic achievement is rarely enough to help them escape the meaty consequences of poverty. Nonetheless, the nation remains faithfully devoted to the promise of the educational ladder. The mere *perception* of opportunity is all that is required to keep the game alive.

During the last decade there has been great concern over the incidence of students, and even teachers, cheating on tests. We can anticipate this from teachers when we tell them that their ability to keep their jobs and feed their families depends upon test scores. We should also expect cheating from students when we tell them that their success or failure in school will determine the quality of their future, where they will go to college and what kind of job they will acquire. Every year wealthy parents give their children competitive advantages by spending thousands, even tens of thousands, of dollars on tutors and test-preparation materials proven to boost grades, SAT scores, and chances for admission to prestigious universities. Academic achievement allows the breath of hope to seep into the economic sorting machine of society. “Cheating” is a logical consequence of members of a permanent underclass determined to scratch and claw their way out of the cellar.

In his Theodore Brameld First Annual Lecture, titled “Education and Social Change,” Michael Harrington pointed out that economists had, during the 1960’s, developed a promising theory: as more Americans earned college degrees, GNP rose alongside the national standard of living (Harrington). Working-class Americans moved up to the middle class. However, throughout the 60’s and 70’s, as the ranks of young college graduates swelled, GNP stopped rising. Real wages stagnated while tuition grew. The nation, and the world, entered its greatest economic decline since the Great Depression. For the first time, Americans with Bachelor’s degrees were driving taxicabs.

Meanwhile, Harrington argued, the recession privatized students. From 1971 to 2001, the Higher Education Research Institute identified marked shifts in students’ stated reasons for attending college. In 1971, the top three answers included: “to help others who are in difficulty,” “to become an authority in my field,” and “to keep up to date on politics.” By 2001, “being very well-off financially” topped the list (Donohue, 91). While the 60’s are lauded as a period of “democratization” for the universities, in the sense of providing access to previously marginalized groups such as women and minorities, the campuses of the 70’s had become colonized by a preponderance of increasingly-indebted, aspiring bourgeoisie. Rising tuition and an anemic job market disciplined those students into pursuing a more narrow and instrumental brand of educational credential. In *The Organization Man* (1957), William Whyte, Jr. reported

that by the early 1950's, campus recruiters had narrowed their interest to graduates specializing in business, accounting, management, science, and engineering fields. Less than 15 percent expressed interest in Liberal Arts majors (Whyte, Jr., 112-113). College-to-job pressures to choose "degrees that work" intensified as students drifted away from the Humanities.

Since the Reagan Revolution, the market's hold over education has intensified, re-investing each next generation with the old industrial ideology of the better life to be attained through economic growth and productivity. Our schools, in the *geist* of the larger culture, continue to operate on the faithful assumption that economic growth and expansion of roles made available by our current job market stand as the best means for achieving Progress. Evidencing this ideology, the Ohio Board of Regents recently articulated the following as the most important questions for Ohio's public universities: "Is schooling streamlined so as to get students out into the job world quickly? Do we have enough students graduating to meet the needs of the economy? Is higher education's commercialization of scientific discoveries adequate for supporting the new economy" (Pyle)? Since Reagan's time, politicians from both mainstream political parties have ritually equated higher education with job preparation and spoken of college graduates as fuel for the national economy (Obama).

Today more young people than ever are attending college. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that from 1999 to 2009 total enrollment increased 38 percent, from 15 to 20 million (National Center for Education Statistics; Jaffe). More than ever, students conceive college as a means to competing for access to better, higher-paying jobs; and they are taking out unprecedented loan sums to pay for their ever-increasing tuition bills. Many of us have mortgaged the content of our futures, that is, the creative and productive potential of our lives, simply to keep up with the pack. According to statistics gathered from the U.S. Department of Education, student debt has risen precipitously from \$90 billion in 1999 to now roughly one trillion dollars. In 2010, the average student borrower carried \$25 thousand in debt, although only half of all graduates found a job in their field within a year (The Project on Student Loan Debt; American Student Assistance; Reich; Levine). Most of that money is owed to the handful of major banks that recently claimed hundreds of billions in federal bailout money (Jaffe). "College student loan debt has revived the spirit of indenture for a sizable proportion of contemporary Americans," writes Jeffrey Williams. Debt "looms over the lives of those so contracted, binding individuals for a significant part of their future work lives" (Williams). As David Graeber reports in *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, the first recorded word for freedom in a human language appears as the Sumerian *amargi*, specifically entailing "freedom from debt" (Graeber, 65). In order to regain our liberty, many of us will face the prospect of selling our loyalty and dignity to the highest-bidding employer (Silver-Greenberg; Khalek; Harvey, 18).

A Return to Leisure

For most, life within our capitalist political economy is a relentless struggle to avoid starvation and destitution. Born into a competitive struggle to sell the contents of our lives in exchange for the provisions necessary to maintain it, many are seeking ways of escape. The ensuing contest of all against all brings out some of the worst of our animal instincts and betrays the tunnel-vision of our herd mentality: we are simultaneously buffalo stampeding headlong off the cliff and rats clawing desperately at each other to escape the sinking ship.

The Behaviorists articulated humbling facts of human nature. Like lab rats performing tasks for food rewards, men and women can be gotten to spend lifetimes within office cubicles, executing routines, and demonstrating subordination to management, in exchange for money that they can use to purchase food and other commodities. Certainly we stay at our cubicles for the sake of survival. Without a paycheck we cannot secure the basic nutrition and shelter that keep us alive. But if we are like most worker bees in the economy, we control neither the contents nor purposes of our work. In this sense our lives are not properly our own. We spend the best hours and energies of our years fulfilling the aims of a propertied master, thereby enlarging capital and increasing its power over us. If we do not like this, a reserve army of the unemployed is lined up waiting to replace us. Thus our job insecurity, which is also food and shelter insecurity, develops into general anxiety, perhaps manifested as addiction to food, shopping, soft or hard drugs.

Shopping, binge-eating, and light drug habits make our bondage more tolerable; but most of us, if we had the choice, would seek to escape wagedom altogether so that we might re-assume possession of our lives. Accordingly we hope some day to own our own business, win the lottery, or achieve full professorship at a university that affords us intellectual autonomy. Many, but not all, desire the independence to manage their own life, complete with its productive, artistic, and loving potential. This was, after all, one of the central promises of the Western Enlightenment. However, the aperture for this sort of opportunity appears to be closing. As more folks than ever strive to make it out, the rat race quickens.

With near-Depression-level unemployment (and underemployment) driving millions out of their homes and into destitution, the number one political issue on the minds of Americans today is jobs. So strong is the force of our ideology that it prevents us from seeing that unemployment is no disease; rather it is the healthy and blissful functioning of an advanced technological society. Our jobs and work ethic are our sickness, atavistic syndromes of a bygone era. “The morality of work is the morality of slaves,” wrote Bertrand Russell in 1932, “and the modern world has no need of slavery” (Russell).

For the ancient Athenians, liberal education, derivative of their word, *eleutheria*, suggested an education specifically “for free people.” Only the Athenian leisure class, unbounded by toil, enjoyed opportunities for *artes liberales*: the arts of debate and politics, together with those endeavors which are chosen freely, for their own intrinsic, non-utilitarian sake.

In a sense, these ancients were wise to limit citizenship to their leisure class. Citizenship requires time and attention devoted to civic responsibility. One has to meet and speak with folks, study the problems facing the community, and debate their solutions. Two thousand years ago, production of basic necessities left few men or women with requisite time for this. Socrates noted that manual laborers made bad friends and citizens because they had insufficient daily opportunity to fulfill those roles (Black). Democratic citizenship requires more than one’s infrequent and passing attention. Yet this is all that is left to anyone dominated by work and distracted by spectacle.

Young persons learn most from the examples set by their elders (Warnick). They cannot learn to become participating members of a democracy by following the examples of their overworked and unleisurely parents and teachers. Democratic education and culture require that all citizens, particularly teachers, enjoy leisure, which is neither mere spare time nor simple means for restoring our vigor so that we may return to productive labor. One hundred years ago,

in the schools of Gary, Indiana, superintended by John Dewey's student, William Wirt, teachers worked no more than six hours a day and took no work home with them (Bourne). The idea was that teachers, as exemplars, ought to enjoy the time and energy necessary to attend town meetings and participate in the larger civic life. Giving life to that same idea today, Deborah Meier, heir to the Deweyan Progressive legacy, writes that we can determine whether or not a school is democratic by looking to see whether those who are to be affected by decisions are themselves engaged in debating and making said decisions. Do students, teachers, and parents have regular opportunities to think about and discuss matters of educational import (Meier, 23)?

Deriving from the Greek *skole*, the modern "school" translates literally into "leisure," a word which carried spiritual significance for men such as Plato, who presided over a religious cult called the Academy, where he and others worshiped the divinity of leisure (Pieper, 70). According to Aristotle, leisure was the end to which work served as a means: "we are unleisurely in order to have leisure" (Aristotle). It was only in leisure that men and women could be authentically human, where we could cultivate the capacity of the mind's eye to receive and become possessed by the deeper realities of the world, to embrace the stillness required for meditating upon our being and destiny. Still at the height of the Middle Ages, laziness remained equated to an incapacity to put leisure to its proper use. The sloth was someone who had fallen prey to a spiritual sickness, restricting them to seeing the world purely in terms of instrumental reason, and accepting work as an end in itself (Pieper, 43). In direct contrast to the old world, our modern *cultus* devotes itself to the worship of labor and reduces leisure to a restorative in the interest of work.

Throughout history the old leisure class has occasionally produced genius. Freed from the burden of toil, Descartes and Darwin remade the world. We can be assured, as Stephen Jay Gould believed, that "people of equal talent have lived and died in cotton fields and sweatshops" (Gould). It is now possible to extend leisure to everyone. No longer must the majority destroy its potential in the performance of alienated labor. Philosophy, art, government, and modern science are our birthright. A society of leisure and wonder awaits, if only we can summon the intelligence and courage to claim it.

Conclusion

The historical view reveals our contemporary horizons of educational opportunity in narrow frame, compared with what they have been and might still be. By opening the apertures of imagination, we can glimpse what life might have entailed, had our ancestors made different choices. More than a century ago, the abandonment of the ideal of self-government in favor of the promise of a consumer's paradise was not a foregone conclusion.

Today we hear from apologists that our poor—currently nearly 60 million Americans—are indeed quite well off (DeGraw). They, unlike their *truly poor* third-world counterparts, enjoy televisions and refrigerators. Such myopic perspectives betray the tunnel vision of our capitalist, materialist ideology. The poor, as a barometer for our larger culture, are suffering spiritually. 60 years after the *Brown* decision, they remain isolated and segregated in their neighborhoods and schools. Seeing only each other, they therefore see little reason to hope. As it did for our ancient ancestors, poverty today locks one into a perpetual survival trip, cut off from the time and opportunity to practice the liberal arts of politics, civics, philosophy, meditation, and all those other pursuits that allow one to experience the rapturous variety of human life.

Not so long ago, Henry Adams named the democratization of intelligence, in his time the central promise of American life, as the crowning achievement of the Western Enlightenment. America was known around the world not because it offered folks the chance to climb a social ladder, but because it lacked any definite scale distinguishing one class from another. Not only the wealthy, but also common and working folk, seized upon opportunities to cultivate the arts of learning and self-government. In comparison, for the past half century, we have boasted of our public education system raising one in twenty up from poverty and into the middle class. During the short course of these recent generations, the everyday habits and mentalities of our culture of productivity and abundance have oriented us toward material reward, and trained us to think and act primarily in terms of individual competitive success. Chained by these everyday habits, it is also, and only, through everyday habits that we may liberate ourselves. Although the habits that chain us are habitual and require only repetition, those that would liberate us require creative acts (Perlman).

From time to time in our history, although few ever predicted it, men and women exploited and excluded from access to the good things in life—liberty, decent education, equal protection of law, and basic dignity—have first recognized the injustice and then risen up to demand its correction. This was the case in ancient Athens, as it was the case in the labor and Civil Rights movements. What we seek from an education today is not more degrees, jobs, and dollars, but the opportunity to transcend our present condition of life; school, perhaps, as relief and liberation from the daily grind of surviving and ‘getting ahead’; resuscitation of education in its fullest and freest sense.

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Author

Thomas M. Falk holds a PhD in Philosophy of Education from The Ohio State University and currently teaches at the University of Dayton.

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