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Pedagogy of Human Capital

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Post-Fordism's appetite for self-directed activity is bringing about a crisis in progressive education. No longer perceived as threatening, a work force trained to think for itself has become highly desirable. So what should an emancipatory education entail today?, asks Stewart Martin

What is the relation of education to capitalism today? And what are the consequences for an emancipatory education? These questions might seem less bold than bald, untextured by the currency of popular debate. Yet they are unavoidable, and not just for the European Social Democracies in the process of negotiating the commodification of their welfare provision, but also for all those confronting the Neo-Liberal restructuring of what used to be considered beyond the market. There is equally a sense in which these questions are both obscured and entrenched by the difficulties in answering them, theoretically as well as practically. Besides the formidable noise of specificities that tends to drown them out, the scene of contemporary education presents striking ambivalences.

On the one hand, there has been an exponential and seemingly inevitable expansion of the realm of formal education, that is, education that leads to publicly recognised qualifications, both in the expansion of the traditional sector of schools, colleges and universities, and in the incorporation of new sectors. This is evident in the rise of student numbers, the extended total length of study, accompanied by the increase in post-graduate degrees, as well as the repeated drives to establish 'vocational' qualifications or the formal ratification of what previously would have been considered apprenticeships or such like. McDegrees did not come out of the blue. The evolution of education as a leisure sector is also notable, as is the growth of educational initiatives within the leisure industries. (This may sound like the privilege of the rich West or North speaking, but, even in more impoverished countries, who is seeking to delimit education?) On the other hand, this expansion of education is comparatively informal, both in the sense that it takes place through new sectors that are outside the traditional institutions and their rules, and in that education as a whole has become in certain respects informalised. 'Distance learning', 'work based learning', 'home based learning', 'life long learning', all indicate the integration of education into realms previously considered outside the school gates. The internet has been instrumental in these developments. The emphasis on 'transferable skills' is also indicative of how various disciplines' rigour has been somewhat suspended or re-qualified. But these expansions, whether formal or informal, stand in contrast to certain pervasive contractions of education. Efficiency is the name of the game, with reduced resources per student the supreme goal, both from the side of provision and from the supplements students must contribute. The rich can buy more resources, but not another goal.

Of course, many of these phenomena and their apparent conflicts can be understood as a direct consequence of commodification. This is certainly fundamental, but what form does this take exactly? Stacking high and selling cheap only accounts for part of these developments. It doesn't explain their ideological function, which draws on certain emancipatory claims. The liberation of 'choice' and 'opportunity' is usually the carrot; the stick is the threat of deserved poverty, whether of the individual or the nation. It is all too clear that education has become a way for rich nations to manage class conflicts, either through keeping people off the unemployment register, or through seducing their populations into the idea that they can all be middle class, with proletarianisation becoming an

attribute of newly industrialised nations like China or India, or immigrant work forces. Within this ideology, failure is educational failure. The idea that contemporary education is characterised by the move away from authoritarian forms of indoctrination and towards forms of self-directed or autonomous learning is perhaps the most powerful emancipatory ideology in this context. 'Life long learning' is exemplary. The phrase oscillates between the dream of fulfilling self-transformation beyond the privileges of youth, and the nightmare of indiscriminate de-skilling and re-skilling according to the dictates of a 'flexible' labour market. It modifies the ideology of meritocracy, which is perhaps the core educational ideology through which the contradictions of capitalism and democracy are recoded as the successes and (more usually) 'failures' of disciplined individualism: 'life long learning' extends 'meritocracy' to the whole of your life. Qualification is a receding horizon; its promise of maturity takes the form of infantilisation.

Many of these educational phenomena coalesce in the socio-political characterisations that have gained increasingly insistent currency since the 1960s: post-industrial society, neo-liberalism, cognitive capitalism, immaterial labour, bio-politics. The socio-economic qualities indicated by these terms - the emphasis on white collar labour and the service economy, and the significance of high-tech knowledge and its socio-economic relations or networks; the de-regulation of labour markets, making labour more pliable to the demands of markets; the commodification of areas of society traditionally considered outside the economy or market, extending the demands of the production and reproduction of labour power to all aspects of social and natural life; the demand for increased self-discipline and initiative, if not creativity, in wage labour; and the emergence of new terms of political struggle and dispute over capitalism and its limits - all provide an increasingly familiar context for articulating the transforming pressures on education today. Indeed, it is evident that education is at the core of these formations. Just as we can draw parallels between the traditional school and the factory, so we can between the dispersal of the factory into society as a whole and the dispersal of the school. The expansion of education is the conduit for the transformation of wage labour, entwined with the procurement of a new kind of labourer and even, some would say, a new kind of human being. Gary S. Becker won the Nobel Prize in economics for his study of 'human capital', understood as the economic value of educational qualifications.[1] The term has since acquired a bio-capitalist currency, standing at the centre of political-philosophical disputes over the commodification of human beings. Rather than the capitalisation of education, it has come to indicate the educationalisation of capital.

These developments have led to a crisis of ideas of emancipatory education. Not merely because they have become embattled, but due to their appropriation and instrumentalisation. John Dewey's critique of 'traditional' education - its dependence on the authoritarian discipline of the teacher, and his defence of 'progressives' taking a non-hierarchical approach to pedagogy, embedding learning within a shared social context, and thereby integrating education into a democratic ethos, committed to the 'quality of experience' - sounds commonplace today, but also naïve about the entwinement of this education within new labour markets.[2] Paulo Freire's inspirational 'pedagogy of the oppressed', despite its direct confrontation with capitalism as a class struggle of master and slave, remains similarly remote in its articulation of the relation of teacher-master to pupil-slave in a way that is removed from the expanded and self-directed context of the new educational forms.[3] Jean-François Lyotard's reports on the postmodern condition of education does manage to articulate many of these forms and their relation to new forms of wage labour, but he is led to profoundly ambivalent conclusions. His claim that, '[w]e should be happy that the tendency toward the temporary contract is ambiguous: it is not totally subordinated to the goal of the system, yet the system tolerates it', is precarious, if not desperate.[4] The ambivalences of this situation are well recognised by many commentators, but they remain. Perhaps this merely indicates that we face a situation that cannot be theoretically resolved, and that theoretical criticism can at best aspire to clarification of the terms of political engagement.

It seems that the root of this ambivalence concerns the way in which the new forms of wage labour require forms of self-directed skills and competences that have previously been considered the preserve of progressive education, namely, its focus on authoritarian and autonomous modes of

pedagogy. In short, the autonomy aspired to by emancipatory education has turned out to involve points of indifference to the autonomy required of new capitalist work. This has profound implications. Crucially, it is entwined with fundamental transformations at stake in the relation of capitalism to life. If education has become the means through which advanced capitalist societies extend the subsumption of labour under capital to the subsumption of all aspects of social life, then the issue of emancipatory education needs to be understood in terms of this radical alteration to capitalism's metabolism.

So, if we ask what an emancipatory education should be today, we are led to questions about changes in the basic structure of capital. This may sound reductive to those seeking a stronger independence of educational concerns from economic matters, but this independence must be wrested from out of the social fact of this reduction. Moreover, there is a reverse determination revealed here, of capitalism itself as an educational form, a pedagogy.

Educating Life

Core pedagogical concepts and forms, such as 'rule', 'freedom', 'subject', 'autonomy', and so on, are already involved in capitalism's fundamental antagonistic relation between capital and living labour, where capital exploits the powers of living labour, appropriating the production of surplus value. Capital aspires to autonomy in this relation; a self-valorisation in which it creates its own value, reducing labour to its rule and its interiority. The subjection of living labour makes capital subject, indeed sovereign. Capital, not the consumer, is king. This is expressed in the contractual agreement of a person, who, as such, is assumed to be free and able to sell their labour as their property, becoming a wage labourer through which their capacities are expropriated. But capital, for Marx at least, is ultimately incapable of autonomy. It remains intrinsically dependent on living labour, which is actually creative of value. Autonomy is rather the potential of living labour, not capital. The struggle of labour against capital is therefore a struggle against the rule of capital, against labour's external or heteronomous determination by capital, and for labour's self-determination, its autonomy.

The educational consequences of this account are various and conflictual, but also profound, extending well beyond the classroom and its textbooks. From the development and dissemination of knowledge about capitalism, and the formation and discipline of 'the party', to the more devolved and self-directed activities of labourers and anti-capitalists – pedagogical issues suffuse this terrain. The deep conflicts between science and ideology, party and proletariat, etc., remain all too familiar today, even though their early forms have decayed. The pedagogy of the oppressed, as Paulo Freire showed, reveals a disputed lesson at the heart of this whole formation: the emancipation of the oppressed from their masters must avoid reproducing new masters, 'emancipators' who invert emancipation into a new form of oppression. The reproduction of class struggle within the communist movement may seem like an arcane problem, something resolved by the more 'horizontal' organisation of recent anti-capitalist movements, but it is a problem that persists in new guises. Moreover, while its solution promises a simplified struggle of slaves against masters, the struggle against capitalism is not so easily personified, especially today.

This returns us to the pedagogical structure of capital itself, about which Freire among others has surprising little to say. The terms of this are in some sense plain: capital functions as a master, subjecting living labour to its rule, the law of value, in the process of its self-valorisation; emancipation demands a counter-pedagogy, disobeying the law of value, enabling living labour to have value for itself. The struggle of labour against capital thus assumes an educational ambition and vice versa, an emancipatory pedagogy of autonomy.

But returning to the ABC of capitalism does not only face the subsequent task of elaboration and specification. It also enables the exposure of deep transformations in the evolution of capitalism, which have equally profound effects for any pedagogy of autonomy. What is at stake here is the intensification of capital's subsumption of labour – extending it beyond the industrial restructuring of labour processes diagnosed by Marx, and even beyond his discernment of an expanded realm of

productive labour that incorporates various social and scientific supplements of the labour process – to the subsumption by capital of life itself. In other words, the colonisation by capital of all those aspects of living labour that were previously deemed outside the labour process, from leisure and the environment, to sex and physiology, and certainly education. The consequences for the struggle against capitalism are self-evidently profound: the dissipation, if not outright negation, of the basic antagonism between living labour and capital.

The contention that capitalism has subsumed living labour may be exaggerated. Few stand by it unequivocally. But it is plausible to consider it as the regulative idea of a number of theories of late capitalism. Furthermore, it is possible to understand it as the source of a series of profound political disputes between Right and Left. On the right, these tend to concern the market's legitimate intrusion into the realms of nationhood, religion, familial life, etc. On the Left, they tend to concern the very possibility of a non-capitalist life; insofar as this seems impossible, its disputes tend to retreat to liberal versions of drawing the market's boundaries.

What is particularly revealing and significant here, certainly for the radical Left, is the intense ambivalence that the contention of capital's subsumption of life has produced within neo- and post-Marxist thought. On the one hand, there is the understandably pessimistic reaction, from the Frankfurt School to Baudrillard, that tends to see the intensification of capitalist subsumption as an incorporation of all social and natural life within the reproduction of capitalism, leading to the exhaustion of anti-capitalist politics, even its imagination. Notoriously, environmental catastrophe seems a far more realistic future for many than an end to capitalism. On the other hand, Negri and others have drawn a radically opposed conclusion: that capital's tendency to subsume life is merely a consequence of the intensification of capital's parasitic dependence on life; that capitalist production processes change not of their own accord, but as a result of the power and resistance of labour. This therefore demonstrates the very creativity and growing autonomy of living labour, which capital only subsumes as an increasingly thin membrane of control, predisposed to disintegrate. For the former, capital tends to subsume not only labour but life; for the latter, capital's tendency to subsume life is merely its tendency to reach its unsubsumable limit. Such opposed reactions to such similar structural characterisations of capital is striking. It indicates an intractable disagreement, since both reactions seem liable to each other's objections. But rather than approaching it as a simple choice or alternative, perhaps it indicates a change of the terms of struggle that needs to be grasped as such: no longer between living labour and capital, as Marx understood this, where capital is understood simply as dead or mechanical; but between alternative forms of life, capitalist life versus non-capitalist life. In other words, not a struggle between life and non-life, but between alternative forms of life. Negri remains an orthodox Marxist in maintaining a residual, unsubsumable, border between capital and life – non-capitalist life remains for him a tautology. The Frankfurt School's thinking of non-capitalist life tended to remain utopian. Neither of them quite confront the predicament that anti-capitalism has become the struggle to wrest non-capitalist life from capitalist life.

This predicament also suggests a change in the significance of the aspiration to the autonomy of living labour. If both capitalist life and non-capitalist life tend to autonomy, then non-capitalist life must be understood according to an alternative form of autonomy. Indeed, given this issue, perhaps the value of autonomy should be revised? Perhaps living labour's heteronomy should be sought as resistant to the autonomy of capitalist life? But how would this advance on labour's heteronomous determination by capital according to Marx's original characterisation? The terms may spiral here, but this speculation is not idle.

The consequences for education are profound and in many respects very visible. Most obviously, the subsumption of life by capital offers a powerful explanation of why education, despite being formally outside the labour process, is nonetheless treated as integral to it, indeed, an urgent and necessary part of the capitalist mode of production. By the same token, it also suggests that the extension of education beyond the formal realms of schools, colleges, etc., should also be seen within this extended orbit of production. In sum, it provides grounds for understanding the subsumption of education by capital, and indicates how education itself becomes a mode, perhaps the central mode, of

capital's subsumption of life. 'Life long learning' is not exhausted by this explanation, but it can certainly be interpreted as a struggle between capitalist-life and non-capitalist life.

But, what of an emancipatory education? Clearly its terms become questionable. If capital can no longer be understood as a mechanical rule that oppresses living labour's autonomy from outside it, then the powerful correspondence this has to a pedagogy of emancipation, as a struggle of autonomy contra dogmatic rules, is problematised, if not inverted. If life can be subsumed by the law of value, such that it is life's own law, its autonomy, then does this not suggest that a new pedagogy is called for?

If these queries are substantive then they indicate a crisis for the terms of an emancipatory education. But they are difficult to resolve. Perhaps this indicates that they should be treated as the issues of a novel struggle between capitalist life and non-capitalist life fought out on an expanded field of education.

Autonomy or Heteronomy?

In order to try and clarify this transformation of terms it is worth considering the broader context of their evolution – in particular, the libertarian and egalitarian formation of the idea of autonomy that emerges with the modern notion of democracy, and that in large part defines the idea and significance of emancipatory education. The French Revolution grounded freedom on equality, as an inalienable right, introduced in the form or guise of 'man', and therefore distinguished its notion of democracy from the aristocratic forms of antiquity. This introduced a non-dogmatic conception of law: freedom must be subject to universal law, demonstrating its equality, but this law must simultaneously be subject to freedom, demonstrating that it is not a new enslavement. This dialectic of subjection infuses the idea of autonomy: a rule to which a subject subjects 'himself'. Obedience is therefore transformed into an act of freedom. In consequence, one is not subject to dogmatic or externally imposed rules – heteronomy.

This idea of autonomy produces a crisis and reinvention of the idea of education. For, insofar as education is essentially a relation of subjection – of student by master – then it is incompatible with the constitution of autonomy. Even if education means merely the transmission of something from those who have it to those who do not, how can there be an education in autonomy? How can autonomy be 'received' without collapsing it into subjection? Autonomy would rather need to be an egalitarian presupposition of any such exchange. If education contradicts autonomy, then it should be left behind in the seminary, or reduced to a minor and subordinate cultural function.

These contradictions justified the various forms of anti-education to emerge from this epoch, frequently attached to the natural, the naïve and the untrained or perhaps self-trained. And yet this anti-education also induced new ideas of education, of an education against education, which might indeed succeed as an education in autonomy. Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education* has his Savoyard vicar profess a faith in 'common reason' to his young companion, rather than conduct 'learned speeches or profound reasonings':

I do not want to argue with you or even convince you. [...] Reason is common to us, and we have the same interest in listening to it.'[5]

Kant, famously enthused by this peculiar education, conceives of enlightenment as a matter of courage: 'Have courage to use your own understanding!' Further:

Rules and formulas, those mechanical aids to the rational use, or rather misuse, of [man's] natural gifts, are the shackles of a permanent immaturity.[6]

The paradox of Joseph Jacotot's universal method of teaching is exemplary: 'I must teach you that I have nothing to teach you'.[7]

The paradox of an education in autonomy should not be overstated, since, if freedom should be subject to equality – albeit as much as vice versa – then education's subjecting function might be employed to this end. Still, this only tends to heighten the tensions that remain precariously in balance in the idea of autonomy. If one becomes free through subjecting oneself to oneself, then there is an obvious sense in which freedom is understood in essentially disciplinary terms, as if doubling subjection cancelled it out, emancipating a subject, rather than just oppressing it twice over. The conception of freedom in terms of autonomy thereby articulates freedom as a function of ruling, freedom as domination. Autodidact: the educational hero of autonomy is well named. It may be insisted that the unity of equality and freedom in autonomy is essentially and necessarily antagonistic, as the unity of competing rules. But this doesn't sound like a good life.

An antidote to this antagonism was found in a rapprochement with nature and life, often via art. This is even the case in Kant, despite his tendency to express autonomy in disciplinary terms, and it was already central to Rousseau. Schiller's letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) is a manifesto of the new pedagogy at stake here. The beautiful artwork presents autonomy less in terms of self-ruling or self-domination, than in the suspension of rules. The whole disciplinary ethos of giving or receiving rules is displaced by play. Art becomes that through which the antagonism of nature and reason is mediated: nature's heteronomy, its externality to human reason, is internalised through art, but without dominating it; hence art presents a way through which reason can relate to human nature without dominating it. Autonomy is then rendered a form of life. This aesthetic conception of autonomy, of a life that is spirit, infuses speculative philosophy from Fichte to Hegel, and is pivotal to the theoretical founding of the influential University of Berlin between 1807 and 1810.

This formation of spirit assumes a profoundly ambivalent relationship to Marx's diagnosis of capitalism. In one sense, Hegel's speculative idealism provides the model for articulating the speculative character of capital as self-valorising value. However, Marx's idea that living labour should free itself from its determination by the dogmatic and mechanical rule of capital – and not just as brute nature – clearly remains indebted to key aspects of a speculative concept of life.

These equivocations are reproduced when we consider the extension of capital's subsumption of labour to that of life in general. Marx's modelling of capital on the speculative concept is simultaneously critical of it, in that he draws a limit to the idea's/capital's subsumptive capacities. But if these capacities exceed these limits in late capitalism then this overcomes Marx's critique, and speculative idealism becomes true in a sense that neither he nor the idealists claimed: a model of the subsumption of life under capital, of capitalist life.

In so far as this is substantive, the whole project of an education in autonomy, even where this takes radically anti-dogmatic and aesthetic forms, becomes problematic, if not undermined, as a simple alternative to capitalism. This justifies the attempt to try and conceive of anti-capitalism through alternatives to autonomy, re-valuing forms of anti-autonomy or heteronomy. This would not only radicalise the aesthetic mediations proposed by Schiller, but exceed them. (This is the alternative sought by Lyotard among others, overcoming Adorno's hesitations.) But anti-autonomy is scarcely a straightforward alternative. Its advocates tend to buy into a neo-vitalism (Deleuze is seminal here) which ironically returns us to Marx's investment in living labour as essentially independent from capital, and thereby to the same problem of living labour's subsumption by late capitalism. Otherwise, a more intensive naturalism is sought out that tends to be indifferent to the subjection of humans and just as indifferent about capitalist culture. It is perhaps unsurprising that in this context an alternative form of heteronomy has also gained ground: a neo-dogmatic anti-capitalism that reconceives of forms of subjection as forms of political subjectivity. (Žižek's and Badiou's alternative Lacanian-Leninisms are illustrative.) These projects are far from escaping the ambivalences of autonomy; frequently, they

simply reproduce them.

The contemporary polemics between autonomy and heteronomy may be complex, but the polemic persists. And while the opponents often fight it out within the Left, its stakes traverse the political spectrum. The claim here is simply that these disputes should be interpreted in terms of the effects of the subsumption of life under capital, and the struggle this produces between capitalist life and non-capitalist life. So we return, by way of another route, to the same junction reached before.

And what of education? The effects have already been forecast, but the issues are modified. Should an emancipatory education be understood as a form of self-determination, or as freedom from self-determination? Should it be free of subjection, or an alternative subjection? Should education be a determination of life, or an emancipation from life's determination? Autonomy or heteronomy? It is difficult to answer these questions, and not just because they are abstract. But whatever the answers may be, for them to constitute an emancipatory education within advanced capitalist societies today, they must engage in the struggle to wrest non-capitalist life from capitalist life.

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Footnotes

[1] Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1964, 3rd edition 1993. Becker won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science in 1992.

[2] See John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916), New York: Free Press, 1966, and *Experience and Education*, (1938), New York: Touchstone, 1997.

[3] See Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), trans. M. Bergman Ramos, London and New York, Continuum, 2000.

[4] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), trans G. Bennington and B. Massumi, Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 66.

[5] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education* (1762), trans. Allan Bloom, Basic Books, 1979, p. 266.

[6] Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (1784), in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History and Moral Practice*, trans. Ted Humphrey, Hackett, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1983, p. 41.

[7] Quoted in J.S. Van de Weyer, *Sommaire des leçons publiques de M. Jacotot sur les principes de l'enseignement universel*, Brussels, 1822, p. 11, itself quoted in Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 15.

Notes

This essay draws some ideas and phrases from a previous essay, 'An Aesthetic Education Against Aesthetic Education', *Radical Philosophy*, 141, Jan/Feb 2007, written as part of the journal's contribution to the Documenta 12 'Magazines Project', in particular its theoretical motif, 'What is to be done? (Education)', which is also available on the Documenta 12 website

<http://magazines.documenta.de/frontend/article.php?IdLanguage=1&NrArticle=1504>

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