A Systematic Political Philosophy of Education

by

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ABSTRACT. My dissertation proposes a fundamental repositioning of philosophy of education relative to political philosophy. I argue that we cannot afford doing political philosophy without a theory of education, just as we cannot afford making philosophy of education modular, insulated from the rest of political philosophy. To this end, I propose a systematic political philosophy of education, meaning both a systematization of existing approaches to education and a comprehensive assessment of their merits and limitations. I reconstruct the main theories of education – liberal, conservative, democratic, and critical – from their most basic social ontological assumptions to their political programs for education. I then argue that they all struggle to realize their goals for education either as a result of flawed social ontological assumptions or because of a failure to institutionalize their commitments in practice. The lessons I draw from these critiques form the basis of my own novel systematic theory of education. My theory combines traditional political philosophy with insights spanning critical theory, social ontology, and education studies. The central goal is to reconfigure the school as a democratic institution of social learning that not only enables the flourishing of all students but helps society as a whole progress.

The project advances on two levels: a methodological and a substantive-normative one. Methodologically, I resist a growing tendency towards the unmooring of political philosophy and philosophy of education. This tendency is peculiar both from a historical and a conceptual perspective. Historically, education was a core issue of political philosophy. Many, even most, of the canonical political philosophers started from the assumption that education is a central purpose of political life. In my substantive introduction, I take a historical excursus through the canonical political thinkers who best exemplify this emphasis on education: Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey. For all the differences in their views, all three understood education as essential to realizing their visions. They would have regarded any political philosophy that failed to address education as incomplete. Today, however, few political philosophers address the subject at all, let alone give it pride of place in their theories. This unmooring has had bad consequences for both subfields. Much contemporary work in philosophy of education takes for granted a liberal social ontology and liberal normative commitments without sufficient critical scrutiny. Similarly, most contemporary political theory neglects the topic of education and operates under the assumption of fully formed liberal agents. The lack of conceptual clarity is mirrored in political practice. Education is marred by persistent and seemingly intractable disagreements – from controversies about indoctrination to failures to realize the ideal of equality of opportunity.

Our substantive disagreements about education, I argue in my first chapter, are not merely value disagreements about the goals of education. They stem from deep-rooted social ontological assumptions about the nature of human beings and society. But these social ontological assumptions are rarely acknowledged, let alone articulated, by political philosophers or philosophers of education. To correct this, I propose a novel metatheory that shows the systematic connections between the social ontology, normative commitments, and political programs of our dominant approaches to education (liberal, conservative, democratic). My reconstruction illuminates several surprising agreements and differences between them. For example, it reveals that many of our most heated political debates about education, between left and right liberals, are merely intramural disagreements among thinkers committed to the same individualist ontology.

The systematic reconstruction also illuminates these theories' failure to generate a coherent vision for education. My critiques show that each approach is characterized by a flawed or incomplete social theory which prevents it from promoting its own values and fulfilling its aims for education. In the case of liberal theories, I show that the liberal goal of cultivating autonomy is self-undermining in light of liberal theory's individualist social ontology.

In the second chapter, I turn to critical theories, which focus on the function of education in reproducing our broader social system. Whereas the dominant approaches start by asking about the nature and goals of education in general, critical theories analyze our contemporary educational systems under specific political and economic conditions. They reveal how schools contribute to perpetuating an oppressive and unjust social system. In other words, the focus of these theories is not on the school as a standalone institution, but as a particularly important *subsystem* in a larger process of social reproduction. While they are promising in many ways, I nevertheless argue that critical theories of education also have distinct limitations. In particular, even though their social theory and normative commitment are more compelling than the dominant views', they do not satisfactorily translate these into practical proposals for remaking our systems of education.

Having found none of the existing approaches fully satisfactory, I start developing the positive and evaluative dimensions of my own view in the third chapter. I go beyond critical social theory while relying on the broad strokes of its ontology of the human. My aim is to supplement this ontology by drawing on both empirical social studies and complexity theory to more precisely characterize the social relations and practices that constitute the domain of education. More specifically, I argue that we can best understand the educational subsystem by attending to its overlap and co-integration with the family, the state, and economic production. Schools are the mediating institutional domain between the family on one hand and the polity and economic production on the other. At the evaluative level, I articulate three critiques of social pathologies that I believe have been ignored or underutilized in critical education studies: alienation, commodification, and fragmentation. Alienation refers to a pathological relation of disconnection from one's own learning, other students, and teachers. Commodification and fragmentation, on the other hand, are problems with the organization and distribution of resources in the education system.

In my fourth and final chapter, I propose a new program for education that seeks to overcome some of the barriers faced by other systematic theories of education. Attempting to counter the problems I diagnosed and explained in the third chapter, I argue for a few different kinds of interventions. First, I propose restructuring the educational system in order to resist fragmentation by pursuing a unified distributive pool, consolidating school districts, and abolishing charters. Second, I argue for a reconfiguration of the co-integrated subsystems of the family, the school, and production that seeks to empower both children and those involved in their care to be involved in free, meaningful work. Finally, I articulate a set of classroom-level practices that seek to equalize access to development for individual students while cultivating their collective social and political imagination. One of the long-term goals is to make schools into democratic institutions of social learning, through which we strive to remove social blockages such as ideology and reflexivity deficits, in order to collectively solve political problems.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

A central aim of this dissertation is to capture the complex interaction of agents, social relations, material conditions, and cultural milieu that shapes education processes. Writing it has often meant reflecting on the particular configuration that has led me to this stage of my education. I hope I can express at least part of the gratitude I feel towards all those who contributed to it.

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This dissertation is dedicated to all my teachers, from Pre-K to PhD.

Introduction

Philosophy of education has become unmoored from political philosophy. This is peculiar both from a historical and a conceptual perspective. Historically, education was a core issue of political philosophy. Many, even most, canonical political philosophers started from the assumption that education is a central purpose of political life. For all the differences in their politics, Plato, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Dewey, among others, all saw education as essential to realizing their visions. They would have thought it strange to address political questions without education. Today, few political philosophers address education at all, let alone give it pride of place in their theories.

Conceptually, this unmooring comes at the expense of both subdisciplines. Political philosophy needs a theory of education. Any vision of the just society presupposes a vision of what human beings are, what they can become, and how. We must know whether we are social and political animals and how deep our sociality and interdependence run before we make any judgments about the best political regime. A bee hive would make a poor home for wolves, given the sorts of creatures they are, just as a pack would make a poor home for bees, given the sorts of creatures they are. Unlike bees and wolves, however, our nature is not our political destiny. How we are socialized determines our capacity to live and thrive under different political arrangements. Hence, the process of human socialization, broadly conceived, is the process of making us into what we are. With a vision of the ideal society calibrated to our conception of the human, we can then figure out how to shape the kinds of citizens who can most effectively pursue and realize it. A theory of education poses and answers these sorts of questions. It is the *middle step* between who we are and who we want to become.

Likewise, philosophy of education requires a theory of politics. Educational institutions do not function in a vacuum. Their ability to shape virtuous people and good citizens depends on being embedded in the right kind of society. "When a father asked him for advice about the best way of educating his son in ethical matters, a Pythagorean replied: 'Make him the *citizen of a state*

with good laws"'.[1] If we are to realize any of our educational goals, we must understand the shaping effects of our practices and institutions on the capacities and dispositions of citizens. We should also remember that schools and universities are not the only institutions through which education is accomplished. With the aid of political theory, philosophy of education can understand the interaction between the family, the school, economic production, religious organizations, media and popular culture in shaping us to be certain kinds of people.

The unmooring has of course not stopped either political philosophers or philosophers of education from producing work in their respective fields. But by proceeding in isolation, both camps leave their flanks exposed. Political philosophers typically begin their studies with uncritically naturalized assumptions about fully formed social and political agents – most often the autonomous, rational individuals of liberal theory. The far from trivial questions of how such agents can be formed and whether these are the kinds of agents we should form are all too often ignored.

This is not a benign oversight. When we take a closer look at processes of subject formation, we see that the kind of education needed to form the political subjects assumed would violate the principles of the theory. Philosophers of education, on the other hand, accept as given much of our existing social and political arrangements – from the current organization of work and the family to the commitments of the liberal state. They therefore limit the educational project to distributional and pedagogical improvements within schools and universities, while tacitly accepting many of the injustices and dysfunctions of the surrounding political world. In other words, much philosophy of education unwittingly defaults to a conservative orientation. As Philip Kitcher puts it,

> To ponder the aims of education by taking for granted a matrix of social arrangements and asking how we expect schools and universities to be reformed to adapt to them is already to presuppose too much. For it is to assume that education is rightly pursued in the contemporary world by continuing to have schools and universities, and also that, if the traditional forms of education are somehow at odds with the ambient environments, that

[1] Hegel, G.W.F. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right.* Cambridge University Press (trans. H. B. Nisbet), 1991, §153, p. 196.

> it's the schools' and universities' fault; the necessary changes are to occur within the practices of education and not to be directed at pathologies of the enveloping societies.[2]

The same tendencies that affect *theory* are mirrored in *practice*. From opposing sides of the political spectrum, schools are blamed for failing to meet their goals. But there are few serious political conversations about what those goals should be or what assumptions about human beings and the social world underpin those goals. Why does it matter that students are performing better or worse on specific standardized exams? What is at stake in debates about academic freedom and what books are available in libraries or assigned in class? In the absence of discussions focusing on these fundamental questions, the space in which education policy is imagined and reimagined remains circumscribed. Policy controversies amount to disagreements about school funding, marginal reforms in standardized testing, and the proliferation of alternative types of schools (e.g. charters, hybrids, magnets, homeschools) rather than ambitious political programs to refocus education in radically different directions.

Why the unmooring?

The advent of analytic philosophy, with its distinctive methods of inquiry and argumentation, as well as structural pressures within higher education, have fragmented and rigidified the branches of philosophy into subdisciplines. What were once parts of systematic philosophies are now narrow and separate fields of expertise and inquiry, with their own literatures, canons, and research agendas. One major rift has happened within social theory, between its normative and descriptive endeavors. If we compare theorizing about the social and political world today with that of past centuries, a stricter division of labor has been established between theorists who try to explain how our practices and institutions function and those concerned with articulating values and goals.

[2] Kitcher, Philip. *The main enterprise of the world: Rethinking education*. Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 31.

This is not a story specific to the unmooring of political philosophy from education, but it is particularly significant given the inherent 'interdisciplinarity' of philosophy of education, with its epistemological, ontological, sociological, and normative dimensions. One result of the unmooring is that while philosophers of education have continued to draw from these other branches of philosophy, the reverse has not been the case. Most epistemologists, for example, are not in an active conversation with philosophers of education, not drawing from their insights about how knowledge is acquired or how processes of teaching and learning can shed light on questions of belief formation or justification. Anything education-related has been more or less delegated to this separate branch of 'philosophy of education'.

This division of philosophical labor is also connected to a change in the social meaning of the vocation of philosophy. To be a philosopher was for a long time centrally about being an educator. That is now longer the case. Today, there is a far stricter division of labor between "theorists" and "practitioners" of education, despite the fact that the vast majority of professional philosophers are college-level teachers. The fact that teaching in primary and secondary schools is so heavily gendered must be an element of any plausible explanation.[3] This feminization of teaching is part and parcel of our oppressive regimes of social reproductive labor. The younger the children, the more femininely coded their care and education, which is accordingly judged as low-skill and low-esteem and poorly compensated. It is no surprise, then, that most college faculty do not think of themselves as 'teachers', and that education studies and teacher training, at both college and graduate levels, are looked down upon by those in other disciplines, including social sciences and humanities.

Another factor is a shift in our understanding of education from the more capacious eighteenth century ideal of *Bildung*, and its ancient origins in the ideals of *paideia* and *humanitas*, to

[3] According to the most recent data, "About three-quarters (77%) of teachers are women and 23% are men, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for the 2020-21 school year, which is the most recent one available. This gender imbalance is especially notable in elementary schools, where 89% of teachers are women." (Katherine Schaeffer, "Key facts about public school teachers in the U.S.", Pew Research Center, September 24, 2024).

a narrower technical and professional training.[4] *Bildung* refers to an ethical formation of human beings towards a telos of "harmonious development" of their intellectual, moral, physical, aesthetic capacities "into a balanced, unified whole".[5] The process of *Bildung* is an active one, in which our self-consciousness and rational agency are engaged, and it has both individual and collective dimensions. It can be understood as the progressive individuation of both human beings and of social groups, including nations and civilizations.[6] But it also has a universal reach insofar as it is conceived as "the collective realization of humanity itself", as Jennifer Herdt puts it.[7] From Herder to Schiller and Hegel, this conception of education involves robust normative commitments about the good life. It aims at instilling specific aesthetic sensibilities and tastes, virtuous desires and inclinations, that guide us towards particular life choices.

Individual *Bildung* itself is social in character, both through its reliance on social relationships as a process and through the sociality of the telos of formation, which is the development of " particular capacities in a way that allows the individual to take a meaningful place in the world and be productive for others".[8] But over and above individual lives, *Bildung* seeks to shape and direct our collective enlightenment and flourishing. This once dominant view is no longer embodied in either our educational practices or theories. The new orthodoxy aims not at *Bildung* but at enhancing individual agency in order to give us opportunities for effective decision-making about the good life in adulthood.

A central reason for this shift is the dominance of liberal political thought in both the academy and beyond. Central liberal commitments such as the equal freedom of individuals as individuals and their ability of all to form, revise, and pursue their own conceptions of the good have resulted in a reluctance, and sometimes outright refusal, to deliberate about the good at a collective, political level. The 'fact of reasonable pluralism' at the heart of liberalism has been used

[4] Herdt, Jennifer A. *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition*. University of Chicago Press, 2019. See Chapter 1 for a fascinating account of the influence of *paideia* and *humanitas* on the modern notion of *Bildung*.
[5] Herdt 2019, p. 82.
[6] For a discussion of Herder's conception of the distinctiveness of peoples, see Herdt, p. 90-94.
[7] Ibid, p. 82.
[8] Herdt, p. 181.

to justify a stance of ethical abstinence in politics.[9] The ethical content of different conceptions of the good or life projects is relegated to the private realm and protected from criticism and interference.

At a policy level, the refusal has taken the form of an attempt to embrace state neutrality between conceptions of the good. This has radical implications for education policy and political discourse. If we cannot justify public policy by appeal to any particular normative worldview or set of values, we cannot even pose the question of what kinds of human beings and citizens we want to form. As Axel Honneth puts it, under the demanding notion of state neutrality, "even the principles of democratically organized collective decision-making are no longer permitted to shape public school education."[10] This orientation gives rise to a *proceduralist* focus in education policy on fairness of distribution and equal access to schooling.

But education is not a resource that the state can simply distribute without substantive normative decisions and deliberations about its content. As I argue in Chapter I, refusing to explicitly debate the question of what values and conceptions of the good we should instill does not mean the question is not *de facto* answered in everyday educational practices. It just means we do not have conscious collective control of how it is answered.

Bridging the Gap: Social Ontology-First Systematic Political Theorizing

How should we approach education within political philosophy to resist their unmooring? My first methodological step is to treat philosophy of education not as a subspecies of applied ethics, but as an integral part of systematic political theorizing. Much contemporary literature tends to view education, like science and technology or healthcare, as just another practice in which the tools and concepts of moral theories can be applied. Some have even explicitly proposed modeling

[9] Jaeggi, Rahel. *Critique of Forms of Life*, see Preface and Introduction.
[10] Honneth, Axel. "1 Education and the Democratic Public Sphere: A Neglected Chapter of Political Philosophy." In *Recognition and freedom*, pp. 17-32. Brill, 2015, p. 22.

the field of educational ethics after the significantly more established bioethics.[11] Many education ethics debates take the form of balancing and calibrating values against each other: freedom and efficiency, distributive fairness and equitable outcomes, autonomy and discipline, democratic civic education and job preparation, etc. They also treat the context of schools and classrooms in isolation from the rest of the political world. The arrangement of the family, production, and political institutions are treated as constants while modifications are sought within education practices. The framing of these debates misses something very important about education, namely that it is the institutional domain in which any political community articulates a vision of itself and its future, of who we are and who we might want to or could become. While I believe that the applied ethics approach is similarly unsuitable for medicine, science, and technology, it is particularly pernicious when it comes to education.

In my view, our apparent value disagreements in education stem from deep-rooted differences about the nature of human beings and society. Our existing political theories, which in this project I group into liberal, conservative, democratic, and critical, all presuppose various conceptions of what human beings are, what they can become, and how through education. In other words, they presuppose a philosophy of education. My project seeks to unearth and reconstruct these approaches and propose a structure for them. As I see it, any systematic political theory of education has three fundamental dimensions: i) positive – the conception of human nature and society, and how education fits into the realization of the good human life and the good society; ii) evaluative – how our present arrangements realize our goals for education; and iii) programmatic – how we should arrange education in light of our goals. Although some theories are silent on one or more of these dimensions, they all rely on some assumptions or commitments about them. In fact, in many cases, these unacknowledged assumptions and commitments seem to be where the most fundamental disagreements lie.

[11] See Levinson, Meira. "We need a field of educational ethics." *Theory and Research in Education* 21, no. 2 (2023): 197-215.

To further motivate my methodology and clarify the stakes for both political philosophy and philosophy of education, in the rest of this introduction I consider three paradigmatic historical exponents of systematic political philosophy that centered education: Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey. I chose the three in order to illustrate what it looks like for political philosophy and education to be united. It is no coincidence that Rousseau took himself to be in conversation with Plato, and that Dewey understands his opus as a response to his two predecessors. Their responses to each other are perhaps even most revealing about the connection between conceptions of the human, political values and commitments, and education as a bridge between them.

I argue that Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey's work share a commitment to treating education as central to their political philosophy. In different ways, each asks how education fits with questions about the nature of human beings, political community, and the best form of political organization. As such, by attending to each of their views I inductively generate the properties of a *systematic political philosophy of education*.

To anticipate, Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey all start from social ontological assumptions – their conception of human nature and the social world. On this basis, they articulate the function of education in political society and prescriptions for how to arrange education to fulfill this function. This means considering how education relates to good governance and who should rule, the division of labor in society, arrangements for the care of the young, as well as our cultural, artistic, and scientific practices. A central question in the systematic political consideration of education is how the family, the school, and the state all relate to each other. Are these three separate spheres of activity governed by different norms and ideals? Or is there convergence between the familial realm and the political regime?[12] What role do schools play in mediating between them?

[12] Koganzon, Rita. *Liberal states, authoritarian families: Childhood and education in early modern thought*. Oxford University Press, 2021.

I refer to this approach as a *social ontology-first* approach to education, but my understanding of both 'ontology' and 'the social' is broad enough to encompass conceptions of human nature or philosophical anthropology. As I see it, there are two main ways in which one's conception of the human can relate to one's philosophy of education. First, human nature can be treated as an end goal or destination – we educate in order to cultivate a human essence that is already present in human beings across time and place. Education, in this view, is a matter of developing pre-existing potentialities. This is the dominant conception of education, present in Plato and Rousseau, as well as in Aristotle, Kant, and most of their contemporary heirs. A second approach sees the nature of human beings as historically changing with our social and political arrangements. Articulating a conception of the human therefore plays a different role in one's theory of education – not an end goal, but a set of ontological parameters and an explanatory device for understanding the limits of historical self-constitution. Education, in this view, is a matter of self-creation. The strand of philosophy that embraces this conception of human nature often traces its roots to Hegel and Marx and includes contemporary critical theorists and proponents of deep or radical democracy like Dewey.[13] I return to this distinction in my critiques of existing approaches to education and defend the historicist approach in my own systematic theory of education.

Beyond the centrality of their conceptions of human nature, all three social theories share a functionalist understanding of society, with education as one of its functionally differentiated spheres or subsystems. While Plato understands human society as a biological organism, "composed of parts or subsystems especially suited to serve specific functions", Rousseau draws our attention to the artificiality of society, meaning the fact that it originates in human will and it is imbued with "self-conscious purposes".[14] It is precisely this social ontology of functional differentiation, as Frederick Neuhouser argues, that gives these thinkers a built-in normative

[13] These two conceptions roughly correspond to the distinction Richard Rorty draws between non-historicist and historicist thinkers, the latter of whom insist that prior socialization and history are definitive of human nature and of our possibilities for arranging the social and political world. (Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge University Press, 1989)
[14] Neuhouser, Frederick. *Diagnosing Social Pathology: Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, and Durkheim*. Cambridge University Press, 2022, p. 92, 105.

criterion to evaluate various subsystems and institutions, namely the specific end they serve within the social whole.[15] Starting with Rousseau and much more strongly in Dewey, we find the traces of a distinctly *modern* understanding of formal education as a mediating subsystem of society, between the family on one hand and economic production and the political community on the other.

Schools as we know them are a relatively recent institutional innovation. Mandatory national education systems emerged at the beginning of the eighteenth century in Prussia and only expanded to France and England a generation or two later.[16] Setting up a national state school system to educate the masses was at various points motivated by goals of modernization, enlightenment, social control, and integration.[17] Whereas early reformers were animated by a desire to educate the peasant and urban poor to undermine the estates system of the ancient regime, later reactionaries sought to reinforce the class system through an education that promoted social cohesion under national identities. The conflict-ridden history of the origins of modern schooling shows a clear understanding among opposing political factions that schools profoundly shape the kinds of subjects that populate our societies, and hence the character of our social practices and institutions. Hegel articulates this idea more precisely in normative terms in his *Philosophy of Right*, where he describes the school as a mediating sphere between the family, i.e. the sphere of particularity, and civil society and the state, i.e. the spheres of individuality and universality.[18]

This structuralist-functionalist insight animates my understanding of what any systematic political philosophy of education ought to accomplish. Although I include the question 'what is the function of schools in society?' in the 'positive' realm of social ontology, it has unmistakable normative dimensions insofar as we direct this function through our collective political agency. It naturally leads into the normative questions of what function schools *should* play in our societies

[15] Neuhouser, see e.g. p. 138, xiv, 31.
[16] See, for example, Schleunes, Karl A. "Enlightenment, reform, reaction: The schooling revolution in Prussia." *Central European History* 12, no. 4 (1979): 315-342.
[17] Ibid, p. 336-342.
[18] Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 1820, §239.

and how we *ought* to arrange our practices and institutions in light of that goal, which correspond to the evaluative and programmatic levels of theorizing, respectively.

A. Education in Plato's *Republic*

The centrality of education to Plato's political philosophy is undisputed. The just political community is a healthy organism, a well-ordered whole in which each part performs its function and does not interfere with the functioning of the others.[19] Education is the means by which the community finds out what each person is best suited for, and hence what function they should perform. The basis of all political community is human beings' neediness. We are not self-sufficient beings, but require others in order to survive and meet our distinctively human needs.[20] So in order to be effective in meeting needs, any human settlement must rely on cooperation. Given our varying abilities and the benefits of specialization, dividing tasks and acquiring different skills and dispositions is the optimal solution.[21] Plato argues that individuals' dispositions naturally place them in a hierarchy consisting of three classes. Lovers of wisdom and truth should be rulers (philosopher kings and queens), lovers of glory their auxiliaries, in charge of protecting the community, and lovers of material gain producers – artisans, farmers, merchants, and all other workers.

But children are not born equipped with the requisite skills to perform the roles they are naturally fit for. They must "be reared and educated by us" to become good occupants of their positions in the social hierarchy. Plato goes on to define education as "gymnastics for bodies and music for the soul".[22] This is not just a figure of speech – Plato is emphasizing that educating children is just as much about shaping their tastes, sensibilities, and embodied dispositions as about cultivating their knowledge and skill. Rhythm and harmony, he says, "insinuate themselves into

[19] See Neuhouser 2022, Chapter 5: "Plato: Human Society as Organism", p. 92-104.
[20] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom, Basic Books, 2016, 369b, p. 46.
[21] Ibid, 374a, p. 51.
[22] Ibid, 376c-d, p. 54.

the inmost parts of the soul" and instill in them a sense of virtue and vice, of beauty and ugliness.[23] The practices and institutions of a political community play a crucial role "in forming the pre-reflective opinions and habits upon which all inquiry rests".[24] Tales provide examples and models, which the plastic mind of the child can emulate.[25] Hence, the polity should take great care about what kind of tales are told, what kinds of melodies sung, and what kinds of pictures painted by considering in each case their effects on the young. The principles underlying soul shaping similarly apply to the body – from physical exercise to food and drink, the city must ensure that what is available to the young is conducive to health.[26]

The main virtue of the whole city is justice, which in the Platonic sense is a kind of order: "the minding of one's business and not being a busybody".[27] So another way to capture the role of the rulers is to make individuals into functioning parts of this whole through education broadly construed. Such a goal involves total social control. Marriage, procreation, and child rearing are the collective business of the polity, decided upon by the rulers.[28] Children must be raised in common by philosopher kings and queens, who are the only ones able to discern their nature and train them to perform the tasks they are most suited for. What is involved in discerning natures, according to Plato, is ease of learning – a child well-suited for a role, unlike one who lacks the requisite abilities, "learns something connected with that thing easily, the other with difficulty; the one, starting from slight learning, is able to carry discovery far forward in the field he has learned, while the other, having chanced on a lot of learning and practice, can't even preserve what he learned".[29] Private child rearing practices are abolished precisely in order to eliminate the influence of contingent factors, such as parents' opinions about the proper roles of men and women, or a family's means to educate their children, from the assignment of roles within the polity. As I have

[23] Ibid, 401d-e, p. 80.
[24] Rorty, Amélie Oksenberg. "Plato's counsel on education." *Philosophy* 73, no. 2 (1998): 157-178, p. 159.
[25] Plato, 377b, p. 54.
[26] Ibid, 403c-404d, p. 82-84.
[27] Ibid, 433a, p. 111.
[28] Ibid, 424, p. 101.
[29] Ibid, 455b, p. 133.

argued elsewhere, this is a model of meritocracy far afield from our contemporary ideas about equal opportunity to compete for careers open to talents. A society is meritocratic when people are in their proper places, rather than when they are free to compete for the positions and goods they most desire.[30]

Already in these passages we can see a radically different orientation to education than contemporary political thought and practice endorse – setting aside Plato's antidemocratic assumptions and prescriptions. In the *Kallipolis*, political leaders are educators. To be a ruler is to be in charge of shaping children to become just, meaning to have the parts of their souls arranged in a hierarchy mirroring that of the city. It cannot be the case that there are specialized teachers who take over the task of education as just another non-political specialized task in the division of labor, because education is, in a sense, the *total task of politics* – training ourselves to be the kinds of people we need for our society to function well.

Education is not just another specialized task performed by a specialized institution of the state. Having a department or ministry of education separate from a department of sports, arts, or culture is a non-starter, given the kind of general political control that the task of education requires. Nor is it helpful to think about education as solely or primarily based in schools. There might be specialized institutions in which specific teachers are tasked with the education of children, but the education takes place in society writ-large and all members of a community, regardless of their trade, are parties to it. As Amélie Rorty puts it,

> The most illuminating-and the most troubling-Platonic lesson is that a well-formed education involves nothing less than a well-formed *politeia*. ('It takes a whole village to raise a child.') If education is to promote *eudaimonia*, - if it is to form sound habits of perception and thought, desire and action, - it encompasses the smallest details of a political system. In short, the ethos and *nomoi* of a polity-its economic and family arrangements, its popular art and even its architecture are the fundamental educators of the city.[31]

[30] Pavel, Sonia Maria. "Two concepts of meritocracy: telic and procedural." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 29, no. 1 (2024): 26-41.
[31] Rorty, p. 177.

The normative priority that Plato affords to the collective good of the city is nowhere more apparent than in the process of education. Here he argues that the pursuit of justice must outweigh the freedoms and rights of any particular individual or group. It does not matter if one's personal preference for becoming an artisan is overruled by the rulers' decision that one is most fit to become an auxiliary. The designers of the *Kallipolis* are not looking to make any of the classes or individuals exceptionally happy, but to make the *city* just.[32] It is precisely this complete subsumption of the individual good to that of the collective that modern political thinkers reject. I offer Plato's conception of justice and education here not as a corrective to our contemporary ones, but as an example of what it means to treat education as a central political question, and to propose a philosophy of education as part of one's systematic political philosophy. Both Rousseau and Dewey follow in Plato's footsteps in this respect, even if for different reasons they reject the substance of his views.

B. Education in Rousseau's *Emile*

Nowhere is the close connection between social ontology, education, and politics more apparent than in Rousseau's *Emile*. Understanding what education requires is key to understanding what kinds of beings humans are. An education that promotes human freedom is, in turn, the central goal of politics.[33] Rousseau makes this clear when he sets up the project of the book with his central diagnosis of modern social pathology. Modern man, he argues, is in a pitiable condition, his impulses distorted and his life fragmented and riddled with contradictions. Far from being natural, this is a condition of corruption whose sources lie in civil society, in the prejudices and institutions of modern bourgeois men. From the outset, the 'natural' is defined as what is not

[32] Plato, 420b.

[33] As Bernard Yack puts it, "For Rousseau, political institutions are measured by the individuals they produce." (Yack, Bernard. *The longing for total revolution: philosophic sources of social discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche*. University of California Press, 1986, p. 50) In support of this claim, Yack cites Rousseau's remarks in the *Confessions*: "I had come to see that everything was radically connected to politics, and that, however one proceeds, no people will be anything but what their government makes them. Thus this great question of the best possible government appeared to me to be reduced to this: What is the nature of the government suited to forming the most virtuous, enlightened, wisest, in short, the best people, taking the word best in its widest sense." (*The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, New York: Modern Library, 404-5; 417-18, as cited in Yack, p. 50).

shaped by the opinions, habits, norms of society. In order to better understand the source of these contradictions and find a cure, Rousseau argues, "natural man would have to be known".[34] But this is only an intermediate step. The ultimate goal is not to restore individuals their pre-social and pre-political freedom, which Rousseau thinks impossible, but to use these insights into human nature to build a modern society that can educate citizens towards freedom, virtue, and self-realization.[35]

Rousseau reconstructs 'natural man' through the fictional pupil Emile, whose education he puts himself in charge of. Given that all forms of education appear to him as corrupting, Rousseau's central purpose as a teacher is to allow 'natural man' to grow and flourish into a free man in full possession of his reasoning capacities. But the naturalness of Emile is at every step revealed to be the result of his tutor's agency and careful pedagogical and psychological designs. A central insight of Rousseau's educational treatise is that freedom in modern society can only be the arduous achievement of conscious efforts undergone in a "highly controlled social setting".[36]

The careful steps in this education for freedom emerge in contrast with the corrupting practices of Rousseau's day. Where the nurses of his time swaddle their babies tightly and constrict their movements, he lets Emile roam freely with care that his environment will not hurt him. While other babies are caressed and pacified whenever they let out a cry, Emile is left to calm himself unless the source of his discomfort can be remedied. Throughout all of the stages of infancy and early childhood, Rousseau proceeds by opposition to the prevailing norms and emphasizes throughout the treatise that the early education of the child must be a "purely negative" one – "it consists not at all in teaching virtue or truth but in securing the heart from vice and the mind from error" until the reason and all other faculties of the pupil develop.[37]

The reason why Rousseau trusts nature is because he believes it endows children with the only inclination they need in order to not only survive but to thrive – self-love. All animals share

[34] Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Emile: or On Education* (trans. Allan Bloom). Basic Books, 1979, p. 41.
[35] For an examination of the complex role that Rousseau's conception of 'natural man' plays in the formation of social subjectivity, see Rorty, Amélie Oksenberg. "Rousseau's educational experiments." In *Philosophers on education*, pp. 249-265. Routledge, 2005.
[36] Amélie Rorty, 2005, p. 247.
[37] Ibid, p. 93.

a natural love of self (*amour de soi*) that animates their drive to preserve their own lives. Self-love becomes corrupted in human society when it degenerates into an other-directed sentiment, which drives us to compare ourselves to others and desire their esteem and recognition (*amour propre*).[38] The habits of society inflame our *amour propre* by making us dependent on other people, constantly having to reflect on their perceptions and judgments of our worth. This is why Rousseau wants Emile to feel like he does not depend on his master or any other people in his life as far as possible.

Here we find Rousseau's conception of freedom as self-sufficiency and independence, which is central to his theory of political community. Men are free when their powers are well-calibrated to meet their own needs. Through the use of their powers, they can extract from nature everything they need for their survival and well-being. This natural 'dependence on things', unlike the 'dependence on men' that society engenders, is not detrimental to freedom.[39] By 'dependence on men' Rousseau is referring to dependence on the particular will of other human beings, which to him amounts to relations of mastery and slavery. Such relations vitiate the characters of all involved, making some vain and proud and others servile and obedient.[40]

Much like children, men in civil society are not self-sufficient – their needs are far greater than the means they have to satisfy them. Rousseau recognizes that this development is not reversible. Our organization of industry, commerce, and the development of cities have made us dependent on others:

> No longer able to do without others, each of us becomes in this respect weak and miserable again. We were made to be men; laws and society have plunged us once more into childhood.[41]

This comparison is deeply significant because Rousseau develops his normative political philosophy in parallel with his normative philosophy of education. In showing us what is necessary

[38] Ibid, p. 92, fn 17 on p. 484. See also p. 213-214.
[39] Ibid, p. 85.
[40] Ibid, p. 85.
[41] Ibid.

to make the 'natural', uncorrupted child free, he is building towards a vision for what we need to do in order to regain our freedom.

His solution for Emile is to educate him in total isolation from civil society in order to minimize his dependence on others, allowing him to eventually overcome it. The only law that Emile knows in his childhood and early adolescence is that of *necessity* – he must develop his senses and faculties to provide for his needs and thus only learn what is useful to him. As Rousseau insists throughout the pupil's development, the engine of education should be a child's own attempt to satisfy their desires. We should let children grow under the influence of their "true masters" - their own experience and sentiments – rather than the prejudices of the day, as transmitted by their parents and educators.[42] Even when knowledge is imparted to Emile, the goal is not teaching him the truth, but training his judgment to be capable of discovering the truth himself. In Rousseau we find the seed of a central educational commitment that the Kantian liberal tradition develops – not accommodating pupils to take knowledge from authority, but teaching them to use their own reason.[43]

Isolation, however, is not a feasible long-term goal in the modern world and Emile must become self-sufficient under the present arrangements of civil society. Rousseau therefore pursues the next best thing to a life of total independence by means of isolation. In a most telling development, Rousseau gives Emile his first and, for a long time, only book – Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, "the most felicitous treatise on natural education".[44] Rousseau sees the catastrophe of the novel's protagonist being alone on a desert island after a shipwreck as a blessing, opening up the no longer available possibility of pursuing self-sufficiency free from the chains of civil society. Whereas Crusoe has to be independent by necessity, Emile will be accustomed to tolerate nothing but independence by choice. He will pursue a profession that requires physical strength

[42] Ibid, p. 178.
[43] Ibid, p. 207.
[44] Rousseau, p. 184.

and skill, like carpentry, whose value is not dependent on the fleeting prejudices of contemporary society and could serve Robinson on the island.[45]

In order to prevent Emile's entry into society from inflaming his *amour propre* and degenerating into vanity and envy, Rousseau begins his moral education. The basis of moral development, he unsurprisingly maintains, is in a natural sentiment that children are endowed with, namely pity. As soon as they realize that other beings can feel pain, children's imagination empathetically transports them into adopting their perspective.[46] Pity is thus an "unmediated pre-reflective sentiment" that "provides the raw materials for the developed civic sentiments and the possibility of identifying with our fellow citizens".[47] This natural sentiment must be cultivated through real experiences, rather than moral speeches and exhortations, and transformed into a generalized concern for the happiness of all mankind, which is the basis for justice.[48]

As Emile's natural passion and attraction towards the opposite sex develop, he must similarly be guided to finding a lover and companion suitable for his nature. In his description of this ideal woman, Sophie, Rousseau makes clear that his conception of human beings as self-sufficient and independent is only reserved for men.[49] Women are their complements, confined to dependence "by the very law of nature", which puts them "at the mercy of men's judgments, as much for their own sake as for that of their children".[50] In order to fulfill her nature and occupy her role in 'the physical and moral order', Sophie must be given an education in perfect opposition to Emile's – to become "passive and weak", "made specially to please man" and "to be subjugated"; "vigilant and industrious"; "constrained very early" in order to submit readily to the will of others; "gentle" to endure the injustice and vices of her husband without increasing them.[51]

[45] Rousseau, p. 201.
[46] Ibid, p. 223.
[47] Rorty, Amélie, 2005, p. 239-240.
[48] Ibid, p. 253.
[49] As Rousseau clearly states when first introducing his ideal woman, "Sophie ought to be a woman as Emile is a man – that is to say, she ought to have everything which suits the constitution of her species and her sex in order to fill her place in the physical and moral order" (357)
[50] Ibid, p. 364.
[51] Ibid, see p. 357-370.

Before Rousseau allows the two to be united, he takes the final step in Emile's education, preparing him to be a citizen and to understand his contribution and role in society. Emile can only be free if he consents to the laws of the political community he lives in. This statement seems to contradict Rousseau's deep conviction that Emile is already free, and certainly freer that any of his contemporary men of civil society. Bernard Yack helps shed light on this step in the argument by showing that Rousseau relies on two different and "mutually exclusive concepts of freedom": natural freedom, the freedom of Emile and the savage, which amounts to independence from both other humans and nature; and human freedom, which amounts to "devotion to a self-imposed end of our own making – the general will of a community of individuals".[52]

Through Emile's entry into political community and his transition from natural freedom to human freedom, Rousseau introduces his theory of the state and political legitimacy. Citizens of a state can only be free if they depend on no particular will, but rather on the general will (*volonté générale*) of all citizens.[53] The authority of the law is not in tension with their freedom, according to Rousseau, insofar as it is a product of the general will – it is willed by all and applies to all equally. Hence his famous model of a social contract, by which a group of individuals become a people by each individual putting "his goods, his person, his life, and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will".[54]

While interpreting the contested issue of the nature and formation of the general will is beyond the scope of my purposes in this introduction, the fact that Rousseau's treatise on education ends where most political philosophy begins is significant. It shows that a view of human nature, human freedom, and how children develop into free human beings through education are all presupposed by the questions of how to organize ourselves politically and what the best form of government is. In Rousseau's case, freedom consists of independence and self-sufficiency. The

[52] Yack, p. 52-53.
[53] See, e.g. Neuhouser, Frederick. "Freedom, dependence, and the general will." The philosophical review 102, no. 3 (1993): 363-395.
[54] Ibid, p. 460.

seed of freedom is naturally contained in individual human beings (or, according to Rousseau, in men) and can only develop with the help of the right kind of social artifice. Laws, norms, and institutions that currently make men weak and servile should be refashioned to promote their freedom.

This conception of citizenship is very different from that of Plato's *Republic*, which Rousseau explicitly considers at the beginning of *Emile*. He argues that we have lost the ideal of the ancient citizen, whose identity was wholly subsumed to the good of his political community. Contemporary civil society is incompatible with this ideal, as it necessarily puts men in relations of interdependence of a different magnitude and kind. In order to discover what living as a free man looks like for modern people, he undertakes the education of Emile, which he refers to as "domestic education or the education of nature", by contrast with Plato's "public education".[55] The next step, which Rousseau's other political works take up, is to build the political institutions necessary to promote the freedom of modern citizens.

C. Dewey's Democratic Education

Dewey's view of human beings, the social world, and the reproduction of societies are the explicit foundation of his understanding of education. *Democracy and Education* starts with his reflections on the conditions required for the renewal of human society. Social life persists and evolves through the transmission of our practices from one generation to the next. For human beings, this transmission consists in the "communication of habits of doing, thinking, and feeling" that enable us "to share in a common life".[56] Unlike the survival of our biological species, the survival of our societies does not happen naturally. Only through great collective efforts of forming human beings' dispositions do our social practices and institutions persist. For much of human history, Dewey points out, this process happened through children sharing directly in the activities

[55] Ibid, p. 40-41.
[56] Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. The Free Press, 1997, Chapter One, p. 3, 7.

and occupations of adults. Participation in a common social life was enough to ensure the social continuity of that life. Formal education – in the form of teaching and later schooling – only becomes necessary as "the gap between the capacities of the young and the concerns of the adults widens, " as social practices grow in both complexity and specialization.[57]

As Plato and Rousseau both emphasize, education does not seek merely to make children's actions externally conform to the norms of existing practices, but to internally shape the sensibilities and impulses of the young as participants in our common activities. The school as a s*ocial environment* is consciously designed to form students' dispositions by placing them in certain habitual situations and avoiding others, exposing them to certain stimuli while protecting them from others. Education, unlike training, according to Dewey, is not content to produce in the pupils outward responses and useful habits that conform to the group's. One is educated when one becomes a copartner in social actions, sharing the ideas, interests, and emotions of one's community.[58]

How is education, as opposed to mere training, accomplished? Human beings, and living beings more generally, according to Dewey, are characterized by the distinctive capacity to *grow*. By growth, he means the "cumulative movement of action toward a later result", which is possible because of human traits that are at their peak in childhood: dependence and plasticity.[59] Children's dependence on others, far from being a lack, facilitates their interest and attention to the actions of the adults around them. Dependence is conducive to growth when coupled with plasticity or the ability to acquire habits, meaning to carry over means of controlling one's environment from past experiences to future ones. Without anyone intending to teach them, children absorb the ways of being and doing of those around them, from attention and observation to language and manners. This is what Dewey refers to as 'training'.

[57] Dewey, Chapter One, p. 7-8.
[58] Ibid, Chapter Two, p. 12-14.
[59] Ibid, Chapter Four, p. 41-42.

Formal education, by contrast, gives a society the opportunity to take much more conscious and intentional control of this formation. The community can purify the school environment of elements that it does not want to transmit and can include a more balanced exposure to its societal achievements and customs than families and local communities provide to the child. The goal is to *free* the socially formed capacities that children already bring to the school "for fuller exercise".[60] This is why Dewey defines education as "the reconstruction and reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience".[61] By increase in meaning, he means an enhanced perception of the relations between various causes and results, as well as between experiences across domains of activity. This basic principle applies just as much to the child burning their hand on a stove and learning the connection between fire and pain as to the scientist studying the properties of various materials relative to heat in a laboratory.[62] In both cases, their acts in connection to heat gain more meaning and can subsequently be used as the basis for obtaining or avoiding certain results in future actions.

Emphasizing growth as the distinctive trait of living beings, and growth through education as a distinctively human trait, leads Dewey to two important conclusions. First, education is an end in itself insofar as it represents "a continuous process of growth, having as its aim at every stage an added capacity for growth".[63] A good school environment, then, is one that gives students the desire for continued growth and the means of fulfilling this desire. One of the distinctive habits that schools can help foster, in Dewey's view, is learning itself, which opens up the virtually unending possibility for continued progress throughout our lives.

Second, and relatedly, there is no qualitative difference between childhood and maturity – what differs is our *mode* of growth, which depends on the extent of our dependence and plasticity.[64]

[60] Dewey, Chapter Two, p. 17.
[61] Ibid, Chapter 6, p. 76.
[62] Ibid, p. 77.
[63] Ibid, Chapter Five, p. 54.
[64] Ibid, Chapter Four, p. 50.

Children are in many respects far more adept at learning and growth. The period of their total dependence on others for meeting their basic needs is coupled with their sensitivity or "capacity to vibrate sympathetically with the attitudes and doings of those about them".[65]

An important consequence of this conception of education is that unlike Plato or Rousseau, Dewey does not view childhood as a 'condition' or a lack that must be overcome. This leads him to reject any conception of education as *preparation* for adult life. Measuring children by the exigencies of adult life is a missed opportunity to channel their current interests to increase the quality of their experiences. What is useful and interesting to the child should be the starting point of education. Otherwise, the rewards of their education appear to them as too distant and uncertain, and punishments and rewards that have nothing to do with learning have to be mobilized in the classroom to elicit their cooperation.[66]

Dewey's ontology of human beings, centering growth through a constant expansion of the quality of human action and experience, is most compatible with a democratic, egalitarian form of association. In order for all to receive the intellectual stimulation that comes from being exposed to new circumstances and experiences, social activities must be diverse and based on a variety of shared interests:

> In order to have a large number of things in common, all the members of the group must have an equable opportunity to receive and take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences. Otherwise, the influences which educate some into masters, educate others into slaves. And the experience of each party loses in meaning, when the free interchange of varying modes of life-experiences is arrested. A separation into a privileged and a subject-class prevents social endosmosis.[67]

Citing Plato's definition of a slave as someone whose actions pursue goals imposed by someone else, Dewey points out that this condition obtains whenever people are engaged in socially valuable activity whose value they do not understand or share an interest in. This is true even in the absence of slavery, in any society where labor is divided along rigid class lines, where only some are engaged

[65] Dewey, Chapter Four, p. 43.
[66] Ibid, Chapter Five, p. 55-56.
[67] Ibid, Chapter Seven, p. 84.

in intellectually stimulating work of planning and design, while others are confined to routine execution. But this affects the quality of experience of the ruling or dominant class too, as their social and emotional experiences are one-sided and distorted.[68]

This leads Dewey to define democracy broadly, as "more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience."[69] The citizens of a democracy not only share a large variety of interests, but make their shared interests the basis for all social and political activity. Democratic commitments go hand in hand with a distinctly pragmatist orientation. Given that the well-being of each depends on the free actions of so many others, our collective good depends on the "liberation of powers" of all to contribute to solving societal problems.[70]

Here, Dewey explicitly recognizes his indebtedness to Plato's ideas about education and political community and contrasts his view with the Platonic ideal city. As he puts it,

> It would be impossible to find in any scheme of philosophic thought a more adequate recognition on the one hand of the educational significance of social arrangements and, on the other, of the dependence of those arrangements upon the means used to educate the young. It would be impossible to find a deeper sense of the function of education in discovering and developing personal capacities, and training them so that they would connect with the activities of others. Yet the society in which the theory was propounded was so undemocratic that Plato could not work out a solution for the problem whose terms he clearly saw.

In other words, democracy is the riddle of Plato's *Republic* solved. As Kitcher puts it, for Dewey, "democracy, *deep* democracy, is education."[71] Only by recognizing the plurality of individual interests and capacities, irreducible to the static and rigid hierarchy of classes of Plato's ideal city, can a society be just and well-ordered. And only by unleashing the powers of all individuals and allowing them to share to the same extent in the organization of their society can

[68] Dewey, p. 84-85.
[69] Ibid, p. 87.
[70] Ibid, p. 87.
[71] Kitcher, p. 134.

a society be dynamic. The continuous growth of all individuals goes hand in hand for Dewey with social progress – both of which are missing from Plato's model society.[72]

Dewey's critique of Plato seems to mirror Rousseau's. There is an emphasis on individuality and the cultivation of each child's talents and dispositions as a necessary part of modern education. But the similarities are limited. According to Dewey, Rousseau is right only insofar he seeks in education the "indefinite perfectibility of man" and our liberation from an oppressive feudal social order that stifled both individual and collective progress. However, the solution is not to "give "nature" full swing" and instead of allowing corrupt social habits to make their imprint on the malleable minds of the young, entrust them to their "natural environment".[73] The problem with this conception is that it overestimates what is natural, or not the result of social artifice, about human dispositions. While individuals are indeed endowed with certain natural potentials and capacities, these are rather indeterminate and will be channeled and directed through whatever experiences are present in a social environment. As Dewey puts it, natural powers "furnish the initiating and limiting forces in all education; they do not furnish its ends or aims".[74] We therefore cannot resort to 'nature' in order to avoid the corrupting influences of culture, but must change the cultural practices that inevitably shape our nature.

Lessons in Politics and Education

In Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey's theories, politics is inextricably linked to education. The question of who should rule is tied to the questions of how those who rule should be educated, and who should educate them. The form and content of political life is understood to depend on what education systems equip citizens for. Issues of political culture and political sentiment, our shared social meanings, norms, and practices, are all scrutinized in terms of the effects they have on the education of new generations. Conversely, the effects of education on our culture and

[72] Dewey, Chapter Seven, p. 90-91.
[73] Ibid, Chapter Seven, p. 92-93.
[74] Ibid, Chapter Eight, p. 114.

practices are brought to the fore. The question of care provision is also at the center of political life: what is a fair division of childrearing and education work between the family and the state? How much control and power should children's families and local communities have over their education? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, all of these thinkers understand the deep connection between how a society produces and how it educates. Everything from what needs people have and how they are provisioned for to how labor is divided both depend on education and shape educational practices.

A central aim of this project is to reconnect the threads tying political life to education. I begin in Chapter I by showing the deleterious consequences of their unmooring for the dominant approaches to education: liberal, conservative, and democratic. Even though these theories of education do not explicitly address the kinds of questions that Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, and other systematic political theorists pose, they do rely on substantive presuppositions about them. I seek to systematize these approaches starting with their most fundamental social ontological assumptions, which undergird the central normative commitments of the theories. From these normative commitments flow a series of prescriptions for how we should organize education. When their positive, evaluative, and prescriptive commitments are reconnected, it becomes apparent that these dominant approaches to education are marred by tensions and contradictions. I show that liberal, conservative, and democratic approaches to education all lack the conceptual and normative resources to realize their own goals. More specifically, each approach is characterized by a flawed or incomplete social theory which prevents it from promoting its own values and fulfilling its aims for education.

In Chapter II, I turn to critical theory – a tradition that is largely neglected in education philosophy and practice. Most theories of education start by asking what the goals of education are and how the educational system should consequently be organized. Critical theories, however, start from different questions: What role or function does the educational system play in this particular social system, under these specific political and economic conditions? How do schools

contribute to perpetuating an oppressive and unjust social system? The answers provided are rooted in and informed by a critical perspective on existing social relations and struggles, rather than in largely ahistorical, general accounts of the nature and goals of education. In other words, the focus of these theories is not on the school as a standalone institution, but as a particularly important *subsystem* in a larger process of social reproduction. While they are promising in many ways, I nevertheless argue that critical theories of education also have distinct limitations. In particular, while their social theory is more compelling than the dominant views', it is not properly connected to the programmatic side.

Having found none of the existing approaches fully satisfactory, in Chapter III I develop the positive and evaluative dimensions of my own view. I go beyond critical social theory while relying on the broad strokes of its ontology of the human. My aim is to supplement the critical ontology by drawing on complexity theory to more precisely characterize the social relations and practices that constitute the domain of education. More specifically, I argue that we can best understand the educational subsystem by attending to its overlap and co-integration with the family, the state, and economic production. Schools are the mediating institutional domain between the family on one hand and the polity and economic production on the other. At the evaluative level, I articulate three critiques of social pathologies that I believe have been ignored or underutilized in critical education studies: alienation, commodification, and fragmentation.

Finally, Chapter IV proposes a new program for education that seeks to overcome some of the barriers faced by other systematic theories of education. Attempting to counter the logics of alienation, commodification, and fragmentation analyzed in Chapter III, I start to build towards a positive program for education. I argue for a few different kinds of interventions to change educational practices and the structure of formal education. First, I propose a few ways to restructure the educational system in order to resist fragmentation, from rethinking school funding and governance structures to redrawing the border between the public and private realms. We should seek to replace the logic of fragmentation and the distributive ideal of *equal opportunity to*

compete with a logic of solidarity and an ideal of *fair access to development*. Second, I argue for a reconfiguration of the co-integrated subsystems of the family and the school meant to empower both children and all those involved in the care of children. This entails not only increased support for childcare through schools, but also redistributing the burdens of care more generally in families and communities. Finally, I articulate a set of classroom-level practices to counter alienation and commodification. I argue for refocusing academic work and student assessment on learning, rather than the competition for opportunities, by modeling learning on an ideal of free, meaningful labor. I also articulate a series of curriculum changes to de-reify our social and political imaginations and build our creative capacities. The ultimate goal is to transform schools into institutions of social learning, through which we collectively strive to remove social blockages and solve problems.

Chapter I

Liberal, Conservative, and Democratic Theories of Education

Philosophers, activists, teachers, parents, and even students seem to agree on very little when it comes to education. Ask five different people what the purpose of schooling is and you will likely get five different answers. Does it help cultivate our capacity for autonomy or is it political indoctrination? Is schooling vital training for the labor market or is it the development of character in accordance with the virtues? Even when we can agree on what the facts are about the nature of education, our judgments differ on how well our systems of education are functioning and how we ought to change them.

There does, however, seem to be widespread transhistorical and cross-cultural agreement on one issue – namely, that our systems of education are in crisis. Cultural and political discourses constantly reference the decay, decline, invasion, assault, or corruption of education.[1] From the condemnation of Socrates for infecting the minds of youth in Ancient Athens to the present-day scandals over the indoctrination of American students through so-called 'critical race theory' (CRT), education seems to be a perpetual source of anger and outrage. Opposing sides decry the state of our systems of education, albeit for very different reasons. But these debates lead only to minor changes in our practices. In fact, the space in which education policy is imagined and reimagined is surprisingly limited. Policy controversies amount to things like disagreements about school funding, minor curriculum changes, and the number of charter schools, rather than ambitious political programs to refocus education in radically different directions.

In my view, our substantive disagreements and nearly consensual perception of crisis stem from deep-rooted differences in opinion about the nature of human beings and society. Views on education, I shall show, are closely derived from our answers to fundamental questions about

[1] See, for example, Dewey, John, *Experience and Education*, Macmillan, 1938, Arendt, Hannah. "The Crisis in Education" (1954); Bloom, Allan. *Closing of the American mind*. Simon and Schuster, 1987; Deneen, Patrick J. *Why liberalism failed*. Yale UP, 2019.

social ontology. With any philosopher's conception of human beings in hand, it is possible to work out the broad contours of what they think education should accomplish. The converse is also true. Given a particular philosophy of education, one can reverse-engineer the conception of human beings that it relies upon.

Uncovering these fundamental assumptions and understanding how they underpin systematic views of education therefore is crucial to clarifying and moving forward in our current crisis as well as those to come. Without seeking to be comprehensive, in this chapter I situate ideas about education in three main systematic social and political theories: liberal, conservative, and democratic. The insights of all three theories shape contemporary educational discourse and policy to varying degrees.[2] After reconstructing these systematic theories, I offer assessments of their central merits and limitations. Ultimately, my critiques show that each is characterized by internal tensions and inconsistencies and therefore cannot effectively function as the basis of our systems of education.

Because these theories are institutionalized in our systems of education, I do not treat them as merely ideal theories, but partly as "solutions to identified problems".[3] Hence, my critiques take seriously liberal, conservative, and democratic ideas *as practical political alternatives* for organizing our systems of education under present conditions. Each offers a distinct systematic view of what education is, how the subjects or recipients of education should be conceptualized, and how we should institutionalize these commitments in practice.[4] To clarify where the agreements and disagreements between the three approaches lie, and assess how weighty they are, I begin by articulating the essential components of a systematic theory of education.

Metatheory: The Elements of a Systematic Political Theory of Education

[2] Political discourse also includes hybrid positions such as liberal-democrats and socially-conservative libertarians. But disentangling and systematizing them reveals the conceptual of possibility for critique and change from within each approach.
[3] Anderson, Elizabeth. *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 6.
[4] Of course, each of these theories has multiple internal variations. Still, I aim to show that it is fruitful to analyze and critique, for example, *the* liberal systematic theory of education, rather than to distinguish between Kantian, Millian, and Rousseauian models.

As I see it, any systematic political theory of education has three fundamental dimensions: *positive*, *evaluative*, and *programmatic* (see Figure 1). Although some theories are silent on one or more of these dimensions, they all rely on some assumptions or commitments about them. In fact, in many cases, these unacknowledged assumptions and commitments seem to be where the most fundamental disagreements lie. Hence, even when they might not appear as such, the theories are *systematic*. Each element is directly related to the next.

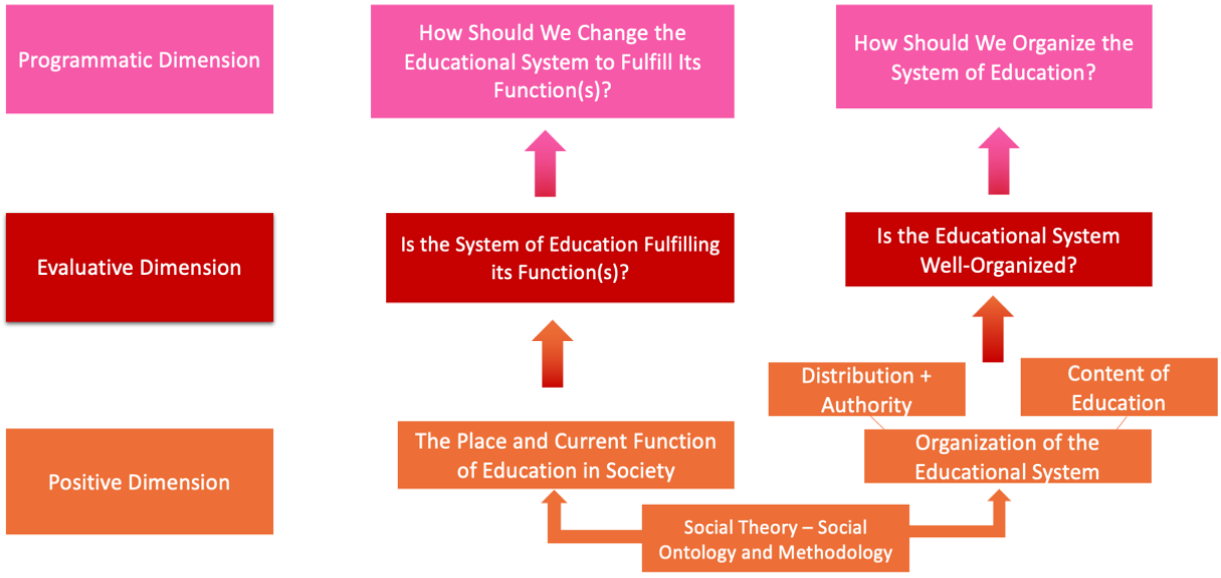

Figure 1 – Metatheory: the elements of a systematic political theory of education.

The *positive* dimension of any systematic theory consists of a set of relevant descriptive and explanatory social theoretical assumptions. Every systematic theory of education starts from a social ontology – a view of the structure of society, as well as a conception of human beings and their relation to other components of the social world (e.g. groups, structures, practices, institutions, etc.). This social ontological starting point does not figure explicitly in most political theories of education or, for that matter, in many political theories writ-large. But the importance of social ontology to political theorizing is hard to overstate.[5] Because social ontology is the true

[5] Alison Jaggar argues that "every political theory is grounded on a certain conception of human nature" and conceptions of human nature are largely centered on ontological questions such as "whether human beings can be thought of as existing prior to or independently of society" and "whether human beings are irreducibly different from the rest of nature" (Jaggar, Alison M. *Feminist politics and human nature*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1983, p. 21, 19). Similarly, Iris Marion Young writes that "any normative claims about society make assumptions about the nature of society, often only implicitly. Normative judgments of justice are about

foundation of our normative views about education, we cannot make genuine progress in our discussions and political deliberations without making it explicit.

To justify placing social ontology at the foundation of my metatheory, I advance two lines of argumentation. On an interpretive level, I rationally reconstruct the social ontological assumptions of each theory and clarify their relation to the resulting conception of education. At the same time, by deriving the normative commitments of these theories from their fundamental ontological assumption, I am demonstrating the value of a social ontology-first approach to the political theorizing of education.

On the basis of the social ontological framework, the positive dimension of each theory seeks to explain what education is – its functions and goals, its institutionalization through the school system, as well as its relative independence or dependence on other parts of the social world. For example, is education a relatively autonomous part of the social world or is it subordinated in part to other economic, social, and political arrangements? The theory then proceeds to describe and explain in more detail the elements of the educational system itself: the different sites of education and their interrelation, the educators, the recipients of education, as well as its content and outcomes. Within every systematic theory of education, the descriptive and explanatory (the ontology and methodology) are inextricably tied.[6,7]

The *evaluative* dimension of a systematic theory assesses our existing practices of education. Each theory has its own internal normative standards and values for assessing the functioning of contemporary systems of education. As I shall show, the normative standards are to a large extent shaped and influenced by the social ontology, but they are not entirely determined by it. This explains why starting from the same social ontological assumptions, we sometimes get distinct

something, and without a social ontology we do not know what they are about" (Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 25).

[6] As Margaret Archer puts it, the two are mutually regulative: "what is held to exist must influence considerations about how it should be explained" and, conversely, "what is held to exist cannot remain immune from what is really, actually or factually found to be the case" (Archer, Margaret S. *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge university press, 1995, p. 16-17.)

[7] I take the positive dimension to be logically or conceptually prior to the two normative ones, but that does not mean that social ontological theorizing is entirely value free. Adherence to a particular social ontology is sometimes motivated by particular political sensibilities.

normative focuses from different thinkers or schools of thought within each systematic theory. For example, there are both conservative and radical political theories that claim to derive their basic social ontologies from Aristotle, but differ in their normative principles and values.

Within the *evaluative* dimension, each theory of education gives a diagnosis of what the fundamental strengths and problems of the system of education are. This entails judgments about all of the elements of the educational system, from whether schools are fulfilling their societal role and whether authority over children's education is in the right hands to distributive concerns about access, differential quality of education, and the fragmentation of schooling into various kinds of institutions – public, charter, private, homeschooling, etc. Evaluation tends to be the most visible component of a theory because it is the one most explicitly invoked in philosophical as well as political debates.

Finally, the *programmatic* dimension consists in each theory's constructive political project, aiming to either maintain, reform, or radically alter the existing practices of education in light of its evaluation. Depending on how far below its standards the current system of education falls, a theory's programmatic response will range from a plan for how to support the functioning of the educational *status quo* to a fundamentally different institutional schema; it may entail merely minor reforms on the one hand or a total revolution in educational practices on the other. Based on a theory's conception of the degree of interdependence between education and the rest of society, the program will also have more or less significant implications and requirements with respect to other social practices and institutions.

Throughout this chapter, I apply this proposed metatheory to what I take to be the three most influential theories of education – liberal, conservative, and democratic. The paper aims to prove the explanatory and critical value of the metatheory *through its use*. More generally, my approach is an exercise in Critical Theory, by which I mean a clarification and critique of the existing theories and practices of education, both the dominant and the opposing alternatives, with

a view to emancipation.[8] As such, many of the assumptions I unearth by articulating these alternatives in the categories of my metatheory are not necessarily obvious or readily accessible to those who hold them (or their opponents).

To evaluate these existing systematic theories, I articulate a critique of their conceptions and programs for education on their own terms or by their own standards.[9] This type of criticism does not simply reproduce a practice by improving participants' conformity to existing norms.[10] Critical theorists employ internal normative resources to eventually *transcend* the practice – either by offering a new, unacknowledged interpretation of an existing standard or by showing that the participants do not or cannot live up to their own standards given certain features of the social world.[11] In other words, they help clarify to the world "the meaning of its own struggle and its own desires" and in doing so "develop new principles […] out of its own principles".[12]

I take liberal, conservative, and democratic political theories of education to cover the majority of the conceptual ground in contemporary debates on education. The upshot of my critiques is that none of these systematic theories has the conceptual and normative resources to realize its own goals. More specifically, I argue that each theory is characterized by a flawed or incomplete social ontology which prevents it from promoting its own values and fulfilling its aims in education.

The Liberal Systematic Theory of Education

i. Liberal Social Ontology – Human Nature and the Nature of Education

[8] Geuss, Raymond. *The idea of a critical theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 55.
[9] This is sometimes referred to as 'immanent critique' in the Critical Theory literature. My critiques combine certain features of this approach with elements of external critique (Adorno, Theodor. *Hegel: three studies*. MIT Press, 1994, p. 146).
[10] In other words, immanent critique is also different from internal critique. For a discussion of the contrast between these methods of critique, see Celikates, Robin. *Critique as social practice: Critical theory and social self-understanding*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018; Stahl, Titus. "What is immanent critique?." Available at *SSRN 2357957* (2013), p. 5-7.
[11] Stahl, Titus. "What is immanent critique" (2013); Honneth, Axel. "Reconstructive Social Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso: On the Idea of "Critique " in the Frankfurt School." In *Pathologies of Reason*. Columbia University Press, 2009.
[12] Marx, Karl. "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing" (1843) in Tucker, Robert C., ed. *The Marx-Engels reader*, Second Edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978, p. 14-15.

"[W]e are born free as we are born rational; not that we have actually the exercise of either: age that brings one, brings with it the other too."[13] John Locke's words encapsulate the *individualist* or *atomist* core of liberal social theory, as well as the difficulties that children pose for it.[14] Rational persons capable of articulating and pursuing their interests and desires are the starting point of liberal accounts of and justifications for political society. Whether these rational, independent individuals are portrayed as egoistic and self-centered or as naturally predisposed to sociality and cooperation, a core liberal assumption about political community is that it is a common cooperative venture of individuals for their mutual advantage.[15] Thus, there is an important sense in which individuals' interests, as well as their ability to understand and articulate their interests, exist independently of (either prior to or in abstraction from) political society. Given this ontological assumption, individuals are also given priority in liberal social theoretical explanations. To understand what society is, liberals ultimately tell a story about the actions and interests of individual agents.

The rational individual persons that populate liberal social ontology are fundamentally equal. Equality is understood both in descriptive terms, such as certain shared capacities or dispositions (including the capacity for free action), as well as in moral ones, such as the equal status and rights of inviolable persons or the equal moral weight of individual interests.[16] This assumption about the pre-social equal status of individuals is part of the *normative individualism* that lies at the core of liberal theories of education. By 'normative individualism' I mean that liberal political morality articulates its fundamental normative claims in terms of freedoms, rights, and duties attached to the individual. For this reason, the main focus of liberal theories of justice is the proper allocation to individuals of material and non-material goods, including income, wealth,

[13] Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*, from *The Works of John Locke. A New Edition, In Ten Volumes*. Vol. V, p. 130.
[14] For a discussion of individualism or atomism, see Taylor, Charles. "Atomism". In *Philosophical Papers*: 187-210. Cambridge University Press. 1985, p. 39.
[15] Rawls, J. *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*. Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 4. The existence of agents who associate politically in pursuit of their own good is at the basis of the social contract tradition that Rawls builds on.
[16] Nussbaum, Martha Craven. *Frontiers of justice: Disability, nationality, species membership*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006, p. 28-32, 57-58.

resources, social positions, and burdens.[17] Normative individualism can be understood as a foundational claim about the ultimate source and locus of ethical value.[18]

Children are neither rational nor free. That age alone brings both about is an exercise in poetic license on Locke's behalf. His arguments in fact show education to be the central process at work in forming the agents of liberal social and political theory.[19] The individualist social ontology and resulting normative individualism are therefore central to liberal educational theory for two main reasons. First, as I argue below, liberal theory conceptualizes the function of education as developing human beings' essential potential for autonomy. To unpack this claim, I reconstruct a short history of the social ontology of individualism and connect it to the aim of autonomy that is definitive of liberal approaches to education. Second, these individualist assumptions result in a commitment to equal concern for individuals *qua* individuals through the distribution of educational goods, as well as the treatment of individual children within schools.

The roots of liberal individualism lie at the advent of Modernity, as far back as Thomas Hobbes' political philosophy. Hobbes argues that what fundamentally differentiates one person from another is the experience of one's own desires.[20] The function of political governance is to ensure the conditions for the pursuit of individuals' desires negatively, by circumscribing the space and ways in which each of us can act freely without interfering with others. He is explicitly arguing against and offering an alternative to the Aristotelean social ontology of human beings as essentially social and political animals, who are not truly human – but either beasts or gods – without political community.[21]

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[17] Iris Marion Young argues that liberalism's distributive focus in questions of justice is owed to its ontologically individualist assumptions. The individuals who are on the receiving end of the allocated goods exist antecedently of the distribution process. As she puts it, "the nature of the possessing subject is prior to and independent of the goods possessed; the self underlies and is unchanged by alternative distributions" (*Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 17).

[18] This level of analysis is not to be confused with psychological or moral egoism, which claims that individuals are primarily committed or should primarily be committed to the pursuit of their individual interests and goals.

[19] For a discussion of how Locke's political theory connects with his thoughts on education, see Oprea, Alexandra. "Locke on children's rights and obligations." *The Lockean Mind* (2021): 507-517.

[20] Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*, Penguin classics, New edition (1985). As he puts it, life is a "continual progress of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the later." (Part I, Ch.XI, p. 160).

[21] Aristotle, *Politics* (C.D.C. Reeves transl.), 1253a30. For Hobbes' response to Aristotle's social ontology, see Stauffer, Devin. "'Of Darkness from Vain Philosophy': Hobbes's Critique of the Classical Tradition." *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 3 (2016): 481–94.

Transformed through Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill's work, this kernel of individualism is at the core of liberal conceptions of education. For most thinkers in the liberal tradition, education quintessentially aims at cultivating *freedom,* understood as rational self-direction or autonomy.[22] This is an instructive example of how social ontology affects how political theorists think about education.[23] Human beings' distinctive ontological trait, namely their individual capacity for self-directed, independent action, is precisely what education cultivates. The concept of autonomy is developed most systematically in Kant's work. According to him, the human animal can only become fully human through education – its 'savagery' or independence from laws is removed through discipline or instruction.[24] In this picture, nature provides only "the germs which education is to develop and perfect".[25] The ultimate goal is autonomy, which for the purpose of this rough sketch can be understood as the capacity to reflect on and bind oneself to particular norms, values, or conceptions of the good.[26] Emphasizing this normative aspect of freedom, Tamar Schapiro characterizes childhood in a Kantian vein as a *predicament* of "normative immaturity" in which the child cannot bind herself to a law, i.e. she cannot reflect on and endorse one motivation over another in a principled fashion.[27]

How do children outgrow their normative 'predicament' of immaturity to become autonomous agents? John Rawls furthers this Kantian idea by proposing a Piaget-inspired psychological explanation of the three stages in which the normative capacities of children develop. First, a child submits to the "morality of authority", in which she experiences parental constraints

[22] For a defense of autonomy as the goal of education from both a public-centered and a student-centered perspective, see Schouten, Gina. "Political liberalism and autonomy education: Are citizenship-based arguments enough?." *Philosophical Studies* 175 (2018): 1071-1093. For other articulations of the autonomy goal in liberal education see Levinson, Meira. *The demands of liberal education*. OUP Oxford, 1999; Callan, Eamonn. *Autonomy and schooling*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 1988; Taylor, Rebecca M. "Education for autonomy and open-mindedness in diverse societies." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, no. 14 (2017): 1326-1337.
[23] There are, nevertheless, some liberal theorists who argue against autonomy as the constitutive commitment of liberalism. William Galston, for example, argues that liberalism should give 'pride of place' to diversity – the tolerance of different ways of living and understanding the world that do not necessarily live up to the standards of autonomy. I understand this type of liberalism as ultimately relying on the same individualist social ontology as autonomy-centered liberalism, even if it leads to slightly different normative commitments for education (Galston, William A. "Two concepts of liberalism." *Ethics* 105, no. 3 (1995): 516-534).
[24] Kant, *Lectures on Pedagogy*, p. 437.
[25] Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. Free Press, 1997, p. 95.
[26] As Arthur Ripstein puts it, being autonomous means "you are the one who decides what ends you will use your means to pursue, as opposed to having someone else decide for you." (*Force and freedom*. Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 33).
[27] Schapiro, Tamar. "What is a Child?." *Ethics* 109, no. 4 (1999): 715-738, p. 729.

and prerogatives that limit her desires as arbitrary, since she cannot understand their justification.[28] This primitive normative condition enables the child to enter into associations and groups other than the family and to understand herself as having certain rights and obligations. The second stage or the "morality of association" is governed by ideals of cooperative role performance, such as being a good player in a game, a good student, or a good friend.[29] Finally, by associating in increasingly complex schemes of cooperation and learning how they promote the good of all those involved, the individual develops the "morality of principles," the ability to govern herself by principles she reflectively endorses as morally good or just.[30]

Education ends when an individual is able to self-direct or govern herself, rather than when she has acquired a particular set of skills. This is not to say that skills are not an important part of education. Kant, for example, divides practical education into 'scholastic-mechanical formation for skillfulness' in various disciplines, 'pragmatic formation' for prudence, and 'moral formation'.[31] But by contrast with the training of animals, which is the inculcation of a limited set of skills, he emphasizes that the goal of human education is giving individuals the full use of their reason.[32] As Meira Levinson puts it, the liberal understanding of autonomy consists in the ability to reflectively form and pursue one's preferences against the background of a "broadly developed moral, spiritual or aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional personality".[33] In other words, education for freedom ultimately consists in learning *how* to think, rather than *what* in particular to think.

Given that education aims to cultivate human beings' inherent potential for autonomy, according to liberal theorists, it must give children the requisite capacities for leading a free life on their own terms. Rather than shaping them to pursue certain conceptions of the good, liberals believe it should provide students with a set of neutral tools that allow them to determine their

[28] Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*. Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 407.
[29] Rawls, p. 410.
[30] Ibid, p. 414-415.
[31] Kant, p. 448.
[32] Kant, p. 447.
[33] Levinson, Meira. *The demands of liberal education*. OUP Oxford, 1999, p. 58.

own.[34] Classical liberal theorists concede that particular systems of education might come to favor some goods over others, but they insist that the state should remain as neutral as possible in the aims and justification of public policy. This commitment to neutrality has been widely debated and criticized in political philosophy. Some liberal theorists accept that total neutrality is impossible. Known as perfectionists, they argue that liberalism rests on a relatively thin, though admittedly substantive, commitment to individual autonomy.

In Jospeh Raz's statement of perfectionism, an individual is only autonomous "if he has a variety of acceptable options available to him to choose from, and his life became as it is through his choice of some of these options."[35] The 'acceptable options' requirement entails the presence of an adequate range of choices that give individuals control over all aspects of their lives and the option to develop all of their abilities.[36] Crucially, the requirement has a qualitative dimension: the options available to the autonomous agent are morally acceptable options or a choice between goods. As Raz puts it, "a choice between good and evil is not enough".[37]

Perfectionist liberal theorists of education can therefore admit that the form of education they are interested in is not entirely neutral. However, those options are only circumscribed by the commitment to individual autonomy itself. Beyond this commitment, they want to say as little as possible about the content of people's life choices. They thus share the core liberal assumption of reasonable, unavoidable pluralism about conceptions of the good; there is and always will be a wide diversity of autonomous lives an individual could choose to live. Whether the system of education is producing a generation of financial advisors and bankers or poets and playwrights is

[34] In a different way of articulating the goal of autonomy and its relation to the school, Eamonn Callan argues that schooling develops students' *interests*. Interests are central to autonomy, in this view, because autonomy is the capacity to regulate one's will by shaping one's 'motivational structure', i.e. the "set of propensities which gives general shape to the individual self and the course of her life" (Callan, Eamonn. *Autonomy and schooling*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 1988, p. 26).
[35] Raz, p. 204.
[36] Ibid, p. 373-376.
[37] Ibid, p. 379.

of no concern to the liberal state as long as these are the result of individuals' autonomous choices.[38]

The final set of questions that liberal social theory answers concerns educational setting and authority. Diverse educational influences are accepted by liberal theorists as legitimate, permitting they respect each child's interest in and corresponding *right to an open future*.[39] The primary caretakers of the child have a major role to play in developing children's capacity for autonomy, partly because of their own freedom to shape their lives. But this role is circumscribed by both the interests of the child and of the state. Building on Mill, William Galston articulates a triadic understanding of the educational landscape, arguing that it must be a balance between three distinct sets of interests: "the developmental interests of children, the civil interests of the state, and the expressive interests of parents".[40] All parents have a responsibility to provide their children with an education that allows them to be independent and self-supporting members of the community. They also have a right to freely choose the values and conception of the good they pass on to their child without external interference, so long as the children eventually become autonomous. The state can step in only if parents fail to meet their responsibility.[41]

But many liberals contend there is no guarantee the family has the resources to provide the wide-ranging skills and knowledge that are required for the achievement of full-blown autonomy or to ensure children's exposure to an adequate array of conceptions of the good. As Levinson argues, not even the most resourceful parents could replicate the institutional setting of the liberal school, a community that is explicitly 'autonomy-driven' – that is, "structured by the norms of critical inquiry and reflection, evidential justification, and mutual respect and

[38] Liberal democrats invoke additional concerns about participating in a system that ensures and protects the freedom of all. However, this commitment is similarly open-ended and formal. In Amy Gutmann's formulation, it entails a commitment to democratically deliberating about education within the bounds of principles of nonrepression and nondiscrimination (*Democratic education*. Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 14.)
[39] Feinberg, Joel. *Freedom and fulfillment: Philosophical essays*. Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 77.
[40] Galston, William. "Parents, government, and children: Authority over education in a pluralist liberal democracy." *Law & Ethics of Human Rights* 5, no. 2 (2011): 285-305, p. 285.
[41] Mill, J.S. *On Liberty* in *Collected Works Vol XVIII*, Ch. 5.

toleration".[42] For these reasons, most liberal theorists conclude that the education provided by the family must be accompanied by the universal provision of education for freedom by the state. This is the source of the liberal concern with *equality* in education, i.e. the equal opportunity of all individuals to develop their capacity for autonomy.

Ultimately, although they begin from a shared set of social theoretical assumptions, various liberal theorists conceptualize education in slightly different ways. These differences lead to distinct normative foci in the evaluation of our contemporary system of education, as the next section shows. But the field of possibility for liberal theorists is definitively shaped and circumscribed by their individualist social ontology. The function of education is the cultivation of our distinctive ontological character as autonomous agents.

ii. The Evaluative Dimension of a Liberal Systematic Theory of Education

Based on their understanding of the function of education and the place of the school within society, liberal theorists advance three kinds of critiques of our contemporary educational system. First, they are concerned with distributive injustice because they recognize that access to schooling is a requirement for all children's development of autonomy. Second, beyond distribution, liberals evaluate the educational system based on whether the content of education advances the goal of developing autonomy. Educational authorities fail, in their eyes, when they direct children towards particular values or life plans or when they do not develop the requisite skills to allow children to form, revise, and pursue their own conceptions of the good. Finally, educational authorities fail when they violate or interfere with the autonomy of other agents, including parents.

Liberal theorists' distributive justice concerns are animated by a commitment to equal concern for individuals *qua* individuals. The state fails to realize this commitment when it either

[42] Levinson, p. 61.

directly discriminates between pupils on morally arbitrary grounds or implements educational policies that have disparate impacts on children based on morally arbitrary traits. There are a number of ways in which liberals operationalize the equal concern for individuals. Two in particular have been central to distributive justice debates in the past few decades: *equality*, i.e. equality of opportunity to compete, and *adequacy*, i.e. ensuring that all individuals attain an adequate threshold of educational attainment, with adequacy specified in terms of ideals such as civic equality.[43]

Equality of opportunity is the dominant understanding of the distributive ideal in the United States and most liberal democracies.[44] Liberal theorists and policymakers criticize contemporary systems of education for providing pupils with unequal educational resources of varying qualities on the basis of morally arbitrary traits. These include parents' wealth, status, and place of residence, which in the United States are highly correlated with race and class. Any educational system that divides students into different distributive pools on the basis of such criteria is procedurally unjust, according to liberal theories.[45] As Brighouse and Swift articulate the ideal of equality of opportunity, "an individual's prospects for educational achievement may be a function of that individual's talent and effort, but they should not be influenced by his or her social class background".[46] For example, the practice of funding school districts through property taxes violates procedural justice, and in particular the equality of opportunity principle, by giving students in wealthier districts more school funding. Increased funding translates into a higher

[43] For defenses of equality as a distributional ideal, see Brighouse, Harry, and Adam Swift. "Putting educational equality in its place." *Education Finance and Policy* 3, no. 4 (2008): 444-466; Brighouse, Harry, and Adam Swift. "Educational equality versus educational adequacy: A critique of Anderson and Satz." *Journal of applied philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2009): 117-128. For adequacy views, see Anderson, Elizabeth. "Fair opportunity in education: A democratic equality perspective." *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (2007): 595-622; Satz, Debra. "Equality, adequacy, and education for citizenship." *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (2007): 623-648. For an overview of the debate, see Brighouse, Harry, Helen F. Ladd, Susanna Loeb, and Adam Swift. *Educational goods: Values, evidence, and decision-making*. University of Chicago Press, 2018, p. 31-35.

[44] Brighouse & Swift 2008, p. 446.

[45] Cynamon, Jeremy Kingston, and Sonia Maria Pavel. "The injustices of school district fragmentation." *Power and Education* (2022): 247-261; Cynamon, Jeremy Kingston, and Sonia Maria Pavel. "Revoke the Charters: A Critical Reevaluation of Charter Schools." *Polity* 56, no. 1 (2024): 163-186.

[46] Brighouse & Swift, p. 447.

quality education and hence better chances of forming, revising, and pursuing their conceptions of the good.[47]

Diversity is used as a proxy for educational justice by many liberal theorists not only because of its promise of promoting equality of opportunity and distributive justice, but also for its effects on the content of schooling.[48] Lack of diversity in values, ideas, and commitments is seen by some liberal theorists as a threat to autonomy insofar as it can lead to indoctrination or the imposition of particular conceptions of the good. One version of this argument stems from a 'liberalism of fear' concern with the tyranny of the state, originally articulated by Judith Shklar.[49] The state can violate the autonomy of individuals by coercing them into conceptions of the good and forms of life that they do not endorse and would not choose freely.[50] Coercion need not take the form of exclusively teaching state doctrines. Even if the state presents a variety of conceptions of the good, evaluating some of them as inferior to the one it endorses is a way of imposing its view on children. Crucially, this is not in principle a peculiarity of the state – it just happens to be the case that most modern states have expansive opportunity and the means of exercising such power over children. Although this is much less recognized in contemporary debates, it is also true of parents. As Levinson points out, "parents have the potential to be at least as tyrannical as the state", which is why there is good reason from a liberal perspective for "outside institutions", primarily the state education system, to keep their power in check.[51]

But the liberal conception of autonomy does not simply require one to be able to adopt and carry out any conception of the good. In some versions of the indoctrination critique, it is crucial that this conception of the good be in an important sense one's *own*. Indeed, some critics complain that one of the problems with indoctrinatory teaching is that it leads to a 'groupthink' phenomenon of uncritical acceptance of a certain orthodox worldview (e.g. Christianity, gender

[47] See Cynamon & Pavel, p. 255.
[48] Merry, Michael S. *Educational justice: Liberal ideals, persistent inequality and the constructive uses of critique*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 123-144.
[49] Shklar, Judith. "The liberalism of fear." *Political Liberalism: Variations on a Theme* (2004): 149-166.
[50] Levinson, p. 66.
[51] Levinson, p. 69.

ideology, CRT, etc.). Levinson calls this potential violation of autonomy the 'tyranny of sameness' and points to Mill as the main liberal proponent of the critique.[52] Mill proposes a theory of autonomy as *self-expression* – we are free when we consciously express our authentic inner-character, rather than passively allowing our social circumstances and external forces to shape us. During the educative stage of our lives, our character takes shape and we acquire the knowledge and abilities required for the exercise of self-expression.[53] The process of education goes wrong if instead of acquiring these skills we become "mere imprints" of our educators and end up sheepishly pursuing their conception of the good. Mill voices this concern with sameness in particularly vivid language, inspiring a broad array of liberal theorists after him:

> A person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture—is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character.[54]

Finally, a distinct area of concern within liberal evaluations of the education system is the autonomy of agents other than children. Schools improperly perform their function if they violate the autonomy of other agents – most notably the primary caretakers of children, who retain certain rights and freedoms with respect to their education. A strong liberal case can be made for various degrees of parental rights and the entitlements that come with having and raising a child. The state overstepping its role in the development of autonomy and imposing a particular conception of the good on children can therefore also be evaluated as a breach of parents' autonomy. For example, parents' conception of the good might entail perpetuating a particular religious community by transmitting that religion to their children. If the public school system imposes an atheist worldview on students, it interferes with that conception of the good. Liberal theories of education thus have the resources to critique the state if it goes so far as to prevent parents from realizing their own visions of the good life.

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[52] Levinson, p. 70.
[53] Mill, J.S. *Address to St. Andrews* in *Collected Works* Vol XXI, University of Toronto Press.
[54] Mill, J.S. *On Liberty* in *Collected Works* Vol XVIII, Ch. 2, p. 264.

iii. The Programmatic Dimension of Liberal Theories of Education

Given the social theory and value commitments just described, what do liberal thinkers and policy makers recommend we do to improve our current systems of education? What is the liberal *program* for education? Most educational systems in the Western world, at least, are governed by liberal principles and assumptions. For this reason, the liberal program for education consists of proposals for reform – both in terms of the distribution and content of education – to better fulfill their existing function.

First, with respect to the content and methods of education, a central normative concern of liberal theories is avoiding 'indoctrination', or the illegitimate imposition of substantive worldviews and conceptions of the good on students. Other debates about the development of autonomy in schools focus on teaching methods and pedagogies that threaten autonomy without being indoctrinatory. Policy disagreements concerning punishment and other forms of classroom discipline, homework, standardized testing, etc. all fit in this category. It is often the case that the disagreeing parties are animated by similar liberal concerns with the development of autonomy, yet have opposing views on which means and methods can deliver the desired results. For example, three states in the U.S. allow the suspension or expulsion of students in K-12 classrooms for "truancy or excessive absenteeism", while many policy makers and teachers believe that the way to remedy such patterns of behavior is not by further excluding children from school.[55]

With regard to the distribution of educational goods, the liberal commitment to equal concern for individuals as individuals has translated into significant policy efforts to organize the educational system more justly. The institution and expansion of universal public education is one of the historical gains of these efforts, which today continue in the form of ensuring that all children have equal, sufficient, fair, etc. access to education. Current policy debates include disparities in education funding (e.g. How much funding should be allocated towards education?

[55] Education Commission of the States. "School Discipline Policies: What *may* a student be suspended or expelled for?", May 2021, https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/school-discipline-policies-01

Should funding be centralized or local? How much redistribution should take place?), inequities in educational achievement (e.g. How do children with different race, gender, ethnic, religious identities fare in schools? How do we minimize the effects of these morally arbitrary characteristics on academic success?), as well as how to best organize the distribution of educational services (e.g. Should we use affirmative action in admissions? How much should private agents intervene in the provision of education?, etc.). There is disagreement among liberals about whether their central commitments would be best realized by a highly centralized state system or a more fragmented and diverse educational landscape.

Finally, the liberal educational program includes policy debates surrounding parental autonomy. Given the broader liberal political commitment to equally respecting all individuals' autonomy, education should not be a process that promotes some agents' autonomy at the expense of others'. The 'school choice' movement in the United States, which has been largely associated with the operation of charter schools, is an example of this policy concern. Other examples include the right to homeschool one's children and how much the state can regulate homeschooling, as well as the question of whether parents ought to be consulted about the teaching of certain subjects or topics in schools (e.g. many European countries allow parents to withdraw their children from religious education classes).

Section II – The Central Limitations of Liberal Theories of Education

The liberal conception of education embraces one of the defining features of political modernity in its educational program. It seeks to convey to students: 'you are capable of determining your life and the school will provide you with the tools to forge and follow your own path'. The idea of autonomy has rightfully shaped our concept of justice. There is no just social order that does not ensure the conditions for all individuals' self-determination.[56] This element of

[56] Honneth, Axel. *Freedom's right: The social foundations of democratic life* (trans. Joseph Ganahl), Polity Press, 2014, p. 16.

the liberal picture of education must be preserved lest we return to pre-modern notions of a Great Chain of Being or pre-determined social and political hierarchies. As Talha Syed puts it, this is "the central distinguishing commitment of liberal society: as opposed to the *ancien regime*, you are not what your parents were, you do not have to share in their fate."[57] But the liberal conception of education, I shall argue in this section, is prevented from delivering on its own promise of developing autonomous subjects by some of its own social theoretical and normative assumptions.

First, the liberal commitment to develop all children's capacity for autonomy is hampered by an individualist social theory and the normative priority of individual rights and liberties. As I explain below, liberal commitments face a serious social reproduction dilemma in the form of an *intergenerational tension between parents' rights and children's opportunities*.[58] Second, liberal theories' individualist social ontology prevents them from analyzing the process of education as an integral part of other social and economic structures. I call this objection *the self-undermining nature of autonomy as an educational goal.* Structural constraints, I argue, represent barriers to the liberal goal of education – the cultivation of autonomy – that liberalism fails to address in the name of autonomy itself.

The realization of individuals' capacity for autonomy requires eliminating or at least minimizing the effects of morally arbitrary characteristics, such as the wealth of parents and their place of residence, on their access to or quality of education. Achieving this in reality would entail a measure of political intervention and curtailing of individuals' rights, particularly in the sphere of the family, which liberals understand as beyond the purview of public policy. Many liberal theorists and policy makers, especially those on the right, argue that the state can only intervene to equalize opportunity so long as it does not interfere with economic liberties, such as the right of private companies to open and manage schools.[59] The same liberal theorists believe that parents' right to

[57] Syed, Talha. "Opportunity to Compete or Access to Development", forthcoming.
[58] By 'social reproduction' I mean the broadly understood processes by which a social formation ensures its continued existence or growth See Haslanger, Sally. "Social Systems and Intersectional Oppression." *Conversations in Philosophy, Law, and Politics* (2024): 399; Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays.* Monthly Review Press, 1971.
[59] Thompson, Winston, 2017, p. 11.

choose what kind of education their children receive, by enrolling them in private schools or even opting out of the educational system altogether through homeschooling, is inviolable.

But even left (or, as they are sometimes called, egalitarian) liberal theorists concerned with wealth inequality, who endorse far-ranging redistributive policies and oppose private schools, can only go so far.[60] Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, for example, articulate a liberal case for severely limiting parents' possibilities of "converting their own resources into superior prospects for their children".[61] They argue that fair equality of opportunity may be incompatible with parents having a right to bequeath wealth or property to their children. However, they contend that the only way to achieve perfectly fair equality of opportunity for children would be to "deny adults the opportunity to achieve – or fail to achieve – what many regard as a crucial component of their well-being", namely benefitting their children.[62] Most parents' conceptions of the good entail offering their children the best possible life they can.

In other words, "parents' outcomes *include* children's opportunities" and preventing unequal outcomes would entail blatant violations of parents' ability to pursue their own conceptions of the good.[63] For this reason, even the most egalitarian liberal theorists of education would not prevent parents from sending their children to a private school or from homeschooling them, nor forbid groups of parents from starting their own schools and school districts. All such measures, necessary for the fair equalization of opportunity, appear to violate parents' basic freedoms.[64] We inherit a world that our parents and ancestors have made based on their conceptions of the good. This is not a controversial social ontological assumption, but a basic social evolutionary fact: any organisms that alter their own environment also alter the environment of their descendants, including their opportunities and resources.[65] The achievement of liberal

[60] See, for example, Meira Levinson's argument against homeschooling (p. 60-63) and rethinking of private education (p. 145-146) in *The Demands of Liberal Education*.
[61] Brighouse, Harry, and Adam Swift. *Family Values*. Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 30-31.
[62] Brighouse & Swift, p. 37.
[63] Brighouse & Swift, p. 36.
[64] For a formulation of this critique from a democratic perspective, see, for example, Gutmann, p. 132.
[65] This is a point that Kim Sterelny captures in terms of 'social niche construction': "Organisms that alter their own environment often change their descendants' environment, too…Children inherit a world and a set of material and cognitive tools from their

theory's main educational goals for children pulls in the opposite direction from its commitment to parents' freedoms. Liberal approaches are therefore faced with an *intergenerational tension between parents' rights and children's opportunities*.

Feasibility concerns aside, it is not clear that taking the ideal of fair equality of opportunity to its logical conclusion is desirable. The opportunities that liberal theories seek to equalize are *opportunities to compete* – for grades, for college admissions, for well-compensated and prestigious jobs.[66] This is what the capacity to form, revise, and pursue one's conception of the good amounts to under our present social and political arrangements. Although many liberal theorists value education non-instrumentally as constitutive of autonomy, the ideal of autonomy is by design an empty vessel. It is filled with whichever conceptions of the good and life trajectories are available in any given set of social arrangements. Under present arrangements, education is a positional good with instrumental value for attaining the social positions available in society.[67] One outcompetes one's peers in order to get higher grades, in order to get into a better college, to get a higher-paying and more prestigious job, etc.

The ideal of fair equality of opportunity, in other words, is an ideal of a fair competition with losers and winners. As Sally Haslanger puts it, in this view "opportunity is best understood as access" and "once access is open, achievement is just a function of talent and desire; those who fail are either unmotivated or lack talent".[68] The competition is fair if morally arbitrary factors such as family resources and income do not interfere with individuals' capacity to rise as far as their talents and hard work will allow them.[69] But it does not question whether education should be a

parents, not just their genes. As a consequence of the interactions between their parents and their parents' world, children inherit an altered set of selective forces and developmental resources" (Sterelny, Kim. *The evolved apprentice*. MIT Press, 2012, p. 175.)

[66] This position is often associated with luck egalitarianism (Dworkin, Ronald. "What is Equality?" Part 1 & Part 2, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (1981); Arneson, Richard J. "Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare." *Philosophical Studies* 56, no. 1 (1989): 77; for a famous critique of luck egalitarianism, see Anderson, Elizabeth S. "What is the Point of Equality?." *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (1999): 287-337.). In his critique of the ideal, Talha Syed points out that equality of opportunity has these limitations not only in its luck egalitarian forms ("Opportunity to Compete or Access to Development", forthcoming).

[67] 'Positional goods' are goods whose value to a possessor "depends on other people's not possessing that good, or not possessing as much of it" (Reich, Rob. "Equality, adequacy, and K-12 education." *Education, justice, and democracy* (2013), p. 58.)

[68] Haslanger, Sally. "Studying While Black: Trust, Opportunity, and Disrespect." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 11, no. 1 (2014): 109-136, p. 130.

[69] As Brighouse and Swift put it, "Modern industrial societies are structured so that socially produced rewards – income, wealth, status, positions in the occupational structure and the opportunities for self-exploration and fulfillment that come with them are distributed unequally. Education is a crucial gateway to these rewards; a person's level and kind of educational achievement typically

preliminary competition for grades and scores that prepares students for participation in a market competition.

This brings me to my second critique of liberal approaches to education, *the self-undermining nature of autonomy as an educational goal*. In short, liberal approaches to education start with the assumption that autonomy is a property of the individual that the school can cultivate once and for all. But autonomy is at least in part an achievement of particular kinds of social relations in practices and institutions. Upon leaving schools, individuals lack the social preconditions of autonomy in most of their spheres of activity, especially the labor market. In the name of the abstract value of autonomy, however, the liberal state cannot interfere with these practices.[70]

Why do liberal theories struggle to see the background conditions of possibility for autonomy? The answer goes back to ontological assumptions – any individualist social theory has limited resources to make sense of the social and political conditions in which the school is embedded. Consider again the liberal account of the nature and function of education. The child is an individual in a *triad* of interests and rights, together with her parents and the state. The parents have an expressive interest in shaping their child in ways they want, within reasonable standards of care and education.[71] The state must ensure that the child develops her skills, talents, and ability to live an autonomous life, but cannot push her in any particular direction. It must also compensate for what are considered "unearned" advantages or disadvantages of students such as family income. If all goes well, the liberal educational trajectory is one in which each student achieves as much as their ability and effort allow them, in pursuit of a self-generated conception of the good.

This simple, triadic understanding of the educational landscape is incomplete and, as a result, misleading. The content of individual conceptions of the good is not just a product of the individual child's dispositions, their parents' own interests and preferences, and the state's neutral

has a major influence on where she will end up in the distribution of those potentially life-enhancing goods." For a critical discussion of this ideal, see Sandel, Michael J. *The tyranny of merit: What's become of the common good?*. Penguin UK, 2020.

[70] For a critical argument against autonomy as an educational goal, albeit one that invokes different considerations than the ones I center, see Hand, Michael. "Against autonomy as an educational aim." *Oxford Review of Education* 32, no. 4 (2006): 535-550.

[71] Feinberg 1994, p. 88.

or perfectionist guiding hand. Which professional trajectories and lifestyles are available, as well as the value and recognition attached to each of them, depends on social and political arrangements beyond the child-family-state triad. These include sources as diverse as how we arrange our social life to provide food, housing, transportation, the way how our kinship networks are organized, the layout of our cities, etc. – in sum, the intended and largely unintended products of our social practices and systems.[72]

The liberal theorist might at this point reply that they can accept my critique of their limited social ontology and integrate my point about the 'background conditions' for autonomy. But why should this be any concern for their central normative commitment to autonomy itself? They might offer the following analogy.[73] If a horticulturalist has a theory about tomato growth that does not recognize certain relevant empirical facts about the requisite soil conditions, pointing out those empirical facts does not give them any reason to stop growing tomatoes. It only gives them good reason to be more mindful of the soil. Similarly, the liberal theorist need not give up on autonomy as an ideal, but simply improve their understanding of its background conditions. But this does not fully capture my critique. What I am pointing to is that the autonomy goal of liberal theories of education is *conceptually flawed, not just imperfectly institutionalized*. To fix the analogy, I am critiquing the horticulturalist for aiming to grow the tomato that waters itself, which is, simply put, impossible. The mistake is ontological, not just normative, in nature. Their goal must shift together with their understanding of what a tomato is and what its growth entails.

Similarly, if our social ontology changes, as I argue it should in the rest of this section, so will the ideal of freedom that we strive for. The autonomy model of individual agents pursuing their conceptions of the good will turn out to be only one part of freedom. And whether the autonomy aspect of freedom is realized is impossible to assess without an analysis of the complex

[72] For an explanation of practices, structures, and systems in response to methodological (ontological and explanatory) individualism, see Haslanger, Sally. "Failures of Methodological Individualism: The Materiality of Social Systems." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 53, no. 4 (2022): 512-534.

[73] Many thanks to Tamar Schapiro for this argumentative move.

web of relations an agent stands in. Such an analysis will have to include a substantive evaluation of the culture one inhabits, the way social practices organize agents around resources, and the resulting social positions available. These social preconditions of individual freedom in turn depend on a level of collective freedom that is not part of the liberal framework.

The social systems in which education is embedded are not up to individual agents – children, parents, and teachers have significantly less conscious control than the liberal picture estimates.[74] Consider the labor market that students enter once they finalize their years of compulsory education. An exercise of their capacity to form, revise, and pursue one's conception of the good is an inaccurate way of capturing the 'choice' faced by most students without a college education as they enter 'unskilled' jobs such as retail salespeople, cashiers, and fast food and counter workers – some of the largest occupations in the United States.[75] As Lucas Stanczyk argues, the reality of most working-class lives is one of subordination, with some freedom to choose which managerial authority one is subject to.[76] Moreover, even a cursory glance at the breakdown of occupations reveals structural patterns of racialized and gendered subordination, with around 90% of domestic workers in the U.S. being women, the majority of them non-White.[77] Who ends up working these jobs is largely the result of class, race, and gender structures, as opposed to a combination of students' autonomy or parents' expressive freedoms.

These structural factors shape the schooling experience and pathways of individual students. In addition to facts about residential segregation and access to lower or higher quality schools, structures of class, race, and gender are reproduced by the system of education. In spite of the intentions of individual teachers, the dominant social meanings and cultural narratives about which roles individuals of certain races are fit for, e.g. that Black male students are not high

[74] Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 23.
[75] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Charts of the largest occupations in each area, May 2022.
[76] Stanczyk, Lucas. "Marginal liberalism." In *The Politics and Ethics of Contemporary Work*, pp. 120-133. Routledge, 2021, p. 123.
[77] Banerjee, Asha, Katherine DeCourcy, Kyle K. Moore, and Julia Wolfe. "Domestic workers chartbook 2022: A comprehensive look at the demographics, wages, benefits, and poverty rates of the professionals who care for our family members and clean our homes", Economic Policy Institute, November 2022.

academic achievers, are perpetuated in classrooms and schools.[78] In other words, education helps *create* race, by forming subjects who can fit within existing social structures by performing either dominant or subordinate roles.[79] The same is true with class. Children who enter school possessing the know-how, ways of speaking, tastes, and cultural habits characteristic of professional and upper-middle classes much more easily acquire academic knowledge and skills, and tend to stay in school for much longer than children of unskilled, low-wage workers.[80] Individual students do not choose from an unlimited menu of conceptions of the good, but within a limited horizon of possibility structured along the lines of class, race, and gender.[81]

Both the menu of options as well as the actual choices made by individuals with respect to their conceptions of the good are enabled and constrained by various parts of the social world. Under a particular regime of neoliberalism, one can choose to be a financial advisor. But under those same arrangements, one cannot choose to live like Diogenes the Cynic or pursue a life of star-gazing. Whether individuals can attain freedom therefore depends on social processes that the individualist social ontology of liberal theories cannot capture.

These social and structural constraints are, to be sure, the result of our collective activity. The problem is that they are largely unintended and unconscious *by-products* our activity, rather than the results of democratic collective control. As Rahel Jaeggi explains, the ethical neutrality or 'abstinence' stance of liberalism "obscures the fact that the selection of possible evaluative decisions is always already predecided in certain respects by the institutional framework of liberal societies as well".[82] Shaping them is within the reach of democratic collectives, but it depends on forms of political action in tension with the liberal individual conception of autonomy. An

[78] Haslanger 2014, p. 123-126.
[79] Haslanger 2014, p. 110.
[80] Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. Vol. 4. Sage, 1990, p. 21-22, 42. Althusser, Louis "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New Left Review, 1971, p. 132-133.
[81] As Bourdieu puts it, "different definitions of the impossible, the possible, and the probable, cause one group to experience as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations which another group finds unthinkable or scandalous, and vice versa" (*Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 78).
[82] Jaeggi, Rahel. *Critique of Forms of Life*. Harvard University Press, 2018, p. 36.

individualist social theory is thus not only a barrier to recognizing and diagnosing the reproduction of these social structures, but also to intervening to address them.

The situation is paradoxical: the autonomous individuals of liberal theory never actually materialize due to various structural constraints, but these abstract individuals are used to justify not intervening to change heteronomous structural conditions. In the name of the abstract free and equal individuals with a capacity to form, revise, and pursue their conceptions of the good, the broader social arrangements are not subjected to sufficient critical scrutiny, nor to any significant attempts at conscious, collective democratic control. For this reason, I refer to this objection as *the self-undermining nature of autonomy as an educational goal*. Liberal theories charge the school with the task of preparing individuals to lead autonomous lives. On the assumption that schools are successful in this goal and that students leaving it are indeed autonomous, they fail to secure the preconditions of autonomy in the social world.

Many liberal thinkers acknowledge the difficulties of teaching and schooling under conditions of structural injustice. Unfortunately, their theoretical framework fails to provide the conceptual tools to address them effectively. When liberal theorists are confronted with the objection that school do inculcate certain substantive dispositions, values, and ways of life, their responses are to either i) double down on a commitment to neutrality in education by arguing against indoctrination; or ii) appeal to individual agency and critical reflection of teachers, policymakers, parents, etc. to form substantive attitudes and dispositions that are autonomy-promoting.

The first response, as invoked by policymakers and theorists alike, is neither politically productive nor philosophically cogent. Political discourse around indoctrination is little more than a partisan blame game of the form "they" indoctrinate, "we" educate".[83] Philosophers' attempts to shed light on the issue have been more productive, but ultimately unsatisfactory. Some have

[83] Egan, Kieran. *The future of education: Reimagining our schools from the ground up*. Yale University Press, 2008, p. 15.

defined indoctrination as the inculcation of beliefs or doctrines "with no regard for argument or evidence" or as leading to beliefs held "close-mindedly", with emotional investment in their truth and a resulting inability or unwillingness to give them up in the face of contrary evidence.[84] These criteria might give us some leverage in differentiating educational contexts that are blatantly indoctrinatory from others.[85] However, they do not offer a satisfactory response to my previous argument, which concerns educational contexts that do not and need not qualify as 'indoctrinatory' by any reasonable standard. In this respect, indoctrination debates are beside the point, distracting from the deeper concerns with the ideal of autonomy itself. The objectionable social shaping that I point to is neither a result of nonrational educational methods nor of the epistemic vices that the students end up forming, but *a function of structural constraints that go beyond the school, classroom, and teacher-student relations.*

The second, more compelling response is usually advanced by perfectionist liberal thinkers who acknowledge that autonomy and liberal democratic citizenship are substantive ideals that themselves must be defended, rather than eschewed in the name of state neutrality. For example, Gina Schouten makes a liberal case for consciousness-raising in higher education. She argues that under highly inegalitarian social structures such as our present labor market, which undermine the equal civic standing of individuals, college teachers are justified in fostering a critical orientation towards those institutions in their students.[86] Similarly, Levinson acknowledges critical theorists' idea of a 'hidden curriculum' that fosters docility and obedience to authority, and hence fails to promote students' autonomy. Her response is that "liberal educators must simply learn to be vigilant […] in order to ensure that [they do] not unintentionally socialize children for conformity to the unjust and autonomy-diminishing aspects of capitalist life and the capitalist system".[87]

[84] For the two definitions of indoctrination, see Merry 2018, p, 164, and Callan & Arena, 2009, p. 111.
[85] I remain skeptical that this is the case, given the substantive normative judgments that are usually implied in differentiating between objectionable indoctrination and unobjectionable teaching. To borrow an example from Egan, the teaching of values such as "openness of inquiry" bears the hallmarks of indoctrination by any definition (2008, p. 16).
[86] Schouten, Gina. "The case for egalitarian consciousness raising in higher education." *Philosophical Studies* 179, no. 9 (2022): 2921-2944.
[87] Levinson, p. 86.

Ultimately, Levinson concludes, the liberal school fares best in counteracting these insidious forces.[88]

These arguments offer the best possible responses from within the bounds of liberal political theory. But they are not fully adequate. First, the material and cultural forces that shape students in particular ways affect their teachers, parents, and educational policymakers. Important parts of their worldviews and practical orientations are deep-seated and not consciously accessible to them upon reflection.[89] We can only put so much of our hopes in vigilant, autonomy-loving teachers with the best of intentions. Many of these individuals are part of the most advantaged educational environments under present conditions precisely because they fit the ideological orientations of those institutions. On the other hand, when located in the least resourced schools where students have few opportunities and little to no meaningful choice about their life plans and projects, their vigilance is not likely to be causally efficacious.

Second, even if individual teachers and parents adopt a critical worldview and develop a consciousness of the structural injustices that schools reproduce, liberal normative commitments cannot justify the kinds of interventions required to prevent those outcomes. I cannot stop my students from going on to pursue jobs in Big Tech even after I have exposed them to a trenchant critique of the industry's effects on our social and political world. Nor should I attempt to do so – that would indeed be a violation of their limited autonomy. While educators can express concerns and criticisms about these trends, the letter and spirit of liberal theory precludes them from working towards producing particular life choices and outcomes.[90] In other words, liberal theories have very limited conceptual and normative resources to *evaluate* the social order that results from

[88] Levinson, p. 87-88.
[89] See Haslanger, Sally. "I—Culture and critique." In *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, vol. 91, no. 1, pp. 149-173. Oxford University Press, 2017; Haslanger, Sally. *Ideology in practice: what does ideology do?*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2021.
[90] As Schouten puts it in the context of her defense of liberal education for consciousness-raising, wary of concerns with indoctrination, "When we talk to students about their career aspirations, we can invite them to consider not just the personal but also the social value of the options they are contemplating." (p. 16)

individuals' autonomous pursuits.[91] Egalitarian interventions into the social order, such as Rawls' fair equality of opportunity or difference principle, are stifled in their redistributive potential by the relative priority afforded to individual rights and liberties.[92] Moreover, even if the liberal theorist privately dislikes or even abhors the sorts of goods individuals produced by the education system are pursuing, they have no recourse to critique them as long as their choices are the result of autonomous decision making – as opposed to coercion or indoctrination. As Alan Ryan puts it, liberals "might go to the length of *nagging* couch potatoes – perhaps by showing public service advertisements during the intervals of televised football games to suggest that they should engage in strenuous rethinking about their lives – but that is about it."[93]

Third, beyond the impermissibility of interference with individual students' life projects within a liberal framework, interpersonal interventions are an inadequate solution to the structural problems in question. One way of capturing the structural nature of the problem is that the social preconditions of individual autonomy are not in place. By 'social preconditions' I mean practices and institutions in which individual agents are given the requisite material and cultural resources to relate to each other as autonomous agents.[94] The domains of family and personal relationships, the market, and the democratic political sphere are all deficient in their realization of individual autonomy in contemporary societies.[95] The undemocratic and hierarchical character of the labor market in particular prevents it from securing individual participants' 'social bases for self-respect' and hence their autonomy. Far from being the institutionalization of a society of free and equal individuals pursuing their good cooperatively, the sphere of work is mostly characterized by compulsion and the unequal accrual of benefits and burdens along class, race, and gender lines. As

[91] For classical arguments about difficulties with ethical neutrality in liberalism, see, for example, MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. U of Notre Dame Press [1984]: 2007; Sandel, Michael J. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Cambridge University Press, 1998; Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Harvard University Press, 1992; Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 1990.
[92] For the lexical ordering of the principles and the priority of the principle of equal liberty, see Rawls, p. 215-220.
[93] Ryan, Alan. "Mill in a Liberal Landscape." In *Cambridge Companion to Mill*, ed. John Skorupski. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 497-540. 1998, p. 529.
[94] As Axel Honneth puts it, these practices are freeing insofar as they are anchored in "role obligations to which all could agree, and which interweave with each other in a way that would enable subjects to view each other's freedom as the condition of their own freedom" (p. 176).
[95] Honneth 2014.

Stanczyk puts it, "the organization of work in modern capitalist societies is strictly incompatible with every adult citizen ultimately enjoying the same basic liberties."[96]

What can the educational system do to contribute towards solving these problems? To be sure, the kinds of interventions warranted by this situation far exceed the domain of education, just as they exceed the conceptual resources of liberal political philosophy. Changing unjust social structures requires a host of interventions not capturable in the individualist terms of liberal social theory – from transforming the social meanings that guide relevant practices to rearranging the material resources and the technological apparatus.[97] For example, tackling the issues of racialized and gendered subordinate labor positions would depend on both reconfiguring the role of markets in the production and provision of basic needs and goods and a conscious reorganization of family and caretaking arrangements towards decommodification and deprivatization. Such interventions would require a conscious repositioning of the school system relative to both the family and economic production. They would also be in tension with the normative priority that liberal theory gives to individual autonomy and rights.

The school thus has an important role to play. But in order to fulfill this role, theorists and policymakers must let go of the liberal understanding of autonomy as a seed contained in each individual human being to be carefully protected and nourished with minimal interference. Individual autonomy is an achievement of social practices and institutions. At present, however, our arrangements do not ensure autonomous lives for most people. Schools are inevitably *partial* to sustaining existing social arrangements. Since their role is preparing individuals to function in social practices and institutions, they cannot be neutral in any meaningful sense. For example, by structuring education itself as a competition and training students as self-interested agents trying to maximize their rewards, schools inevitably model and prepare individuals for later competitions.

[96] Stanczyk 2021, p. 126.
[97] Haslanger, Sally. "Social Systems and Intersectional Oppression." *Conversations in Philosophy, Law, and Politics* (2024): 399.

Rather than ignoring this crucial reproductive function, schools should foster social arrangements that expand citizens' socially embedded agency and freedom. As democratic theorists since Dewey have argued, schools must actively try to inculcate the practical habits and dispositions of cooperation, concern for the common good, and solidarity.[98] These must extend not only to the institutions of the liberal democratic state, but to market and family relations. Beyond these dispositions, schools must actively play a role in creating more equitable pathways of learning, development, and work. Taking steps to further institutionalize education as a developmental good, rather than an instrumentally valuable input in a fair competition, would be the place to start. This would require thinking about education as inextricably linked to a substantive conception of human flourishing and a particular version of the good life, as opposed to a neutral tool to realize whatever life projects happen to be available under existing social arrangements.[99]

The crux of my critique is that liberal approaches to education correctly emphasize freedom as a central value that our social and political arrangements must attain. However, their social ontology and conception of education are not well-suited to realizing this goal. In this section, I first showed the central tension at the core of liberal theories between the commitment to the development of all children's autonomy and the present rights and freedoms of individuals. This tension poses inherent barriers to even the most ambitious redistributive efforts of progressive liberal theorists and policymakers. Second, I argued that the liberal social ontology does not give us the proper resources to analyze the process of education as an integral part of the social and economic *reproduction* of society. Existing social arrangements are effective *barriers to the liberal goal of education* – the cultivation of autonomy. At the same time, however, the commitment to autonomy and the ideal of neutrality in education it supports prevent liberal theorists from

[98] See, for example, Dewey, John. *The Child and the Curriculum and The School and Society, Introd. by Leonard Carmichael*. UChicago Press, 1968; Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, The Free Press, 1997.

[99] At this point, the perfectionist might claim that our positive visions are fairly similar. But as I argue in other parts of my project, the ideal of flourishing I have in mind is fairly substantive and includes both a range of specific capabilities and, crucially, an ideal of meaningful work.

effectively changing our social systems. Liberal theories of education put the proverbial cart of individual autonomy before the horse of social relations and institutions constitutive of autonomy.

The Conservative Systematic Theory of Education

i. The Positive Dimension – Conservative Social Theory

Although the 'conservative' tradition is similarly broad and in some of its strands shares the individualist assumptions of liberalism, I am here focused on a conservative theory of education that represents a systematic alternative to the liberal model. By systematic alternative I mean that starting from different social theoretical assumptions, it provides a distinct approach to education on the positive, evaluative, and programmatic dimensions. I take this conservative tradition to be a strand of communitarianism – broadly understood as the philosophical view that understands human beings, their identities and characters, to be socially constituted in particular communities. Modern communitarians often draw on and trace the origins of their ideas to Aristotle, sometimes by way of Aquinas and his influence on Catholic theology or Maimonides and his influence on Jewish theology.[100] This is not to suggest that all, or even most, conservative theorists are Aristotelian communitarians. But those who propose a systematic alternative for education, I argue, rely on certain important social theoretical foundations that can be helpfully situated in this tradition.

To begin with, a key presupposition of this type of conservatism is that human beings are social and political animals.[101] As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, we are 'dependent rational animals' – vulnerable beings who need communities and social relationships to develop and exercise our capacity for practical reasoning.[102] Unlike the self-contained atoms that populate liberal social

[100] It is worth pointing out here that, as Bernard Yack explains, the claims of modern communitarians often go beyond and are even in tension with some of Aristotle's own. For example, communitarians often define 'community' as implying belonging, communion, harmony that is not a part of Aristotle's more general conception of *koinonia*, and certainly are not required by political community in an Aristotelian sense (*The Problems of a Political Animal*, p. 43-50).
[101] Aristotle, *Politics* (C.D.C. Reeves transl.), 1253a.
[102] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *Dependent rational animals: Why human beings need the virtues*. Vol. 20. Open Court Publishing, 1999, p. 81-98.

ontology, human beings in this communitarian understanding are naturally disposed to form and participate in community, and more particularly political community, which "completes human development in such a way as to make the good life possible."[103] *Political* community is characterized by members' development and exercise of their distinctly human reasoning and deliberative capacities in the development and maintenance of rules and standards of justice.[104] Moreover, by contrast with liberal individuals, whose autonomy does not fundamentally depend on the existence of political communities, human beings in the conservative view have an essential need for political communities to lead good lives. As Aristotle puts it, one who cannot or does not need to live in political community is not truly human, but "either a beast or a god".[105]

What does this good life, which can only be achieved in community, consist of? Aristotle defines the human good as a distinct kind of happiness that consists in "the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue […] over a complete life", where virtues are both intellectual (e.g. wisdom, judgment) and of character (e.g. courage, generosity).[106] Children are thus not naturally good or virtuous – they only have the potential to lead a life of complete virtue.[107] Given that an essential component of being virtuous in Aristotle's view is feeling pleasure and pain in the performance of virtuous and vicious actions respectively, education must inculcate these responses in human beings:

> It is for this reason that we need to have been brought up in a particular way from our early days, as Plato says, so we might find enjoyment or pain in the right things; for the right education is just this.[108]

To carry out this 'right education', Aristotle emphasizes the necessity of a political community with an established *rule of laws*. By 'laws' he does not mean only legal statutes or

[103] Yack, p. 62.
[104] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a12.
[105] Ibid, 1253a30.
[106] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (transl. Roger Crisp, Cambridge University Press, 2000), Book I, 1098a, 1103a. Aristotle interpreters disagree about the relation between morally excellent activity, excellent intellectual activity, and happiness. Although Aristotle clearly states that purely intellectual activity (contemplation) is more excellent than moral and political excellent action, it is not clear whether contemplation simply is the highest happiness and moral excellence is a means to it or the two represent two kinds or parts of happiness. For more on this see Frankena, William K. *Three historical philosophies of education: Aristotle, Kant, Dewey*, Chicago: Scott, Foresman (1965), p. 28-39.
[107] Ibid, 1100a.
[108] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b.

constitutions, but all general norms that govern mutual obligations in a community, including customary, conventional, and religious norms.[109] The crucial characteristic of a lawful political regime for Aristotle is neither its moral rectitude nor its regularity, but the fact that it cultivates a moral disposition "to follow and apply general rules".[110] By habituating us to act as virtuous people would, laws help us develop and cultivate moral dispositions, which eventually solidify as our virtues of character.[111] Aristotle acknowledges that the rule of laws is one of force and compulsion, but he thinks this is necessary to counteract natural feelings and inclinations. Human beings thus brought up "will not find them painful once they have been accustomed to them".[112] Most importantly, the force of the law's prescriptions, he argues, is never felt to be as oppressive as that of a person who stands in opposition to one's impulses.[113]

The good life for Aristotle is therefore the life of the virtuous person embedded in a lawful political community. This emphasis on the particularity of community is a central element of the conservative approach to education. One is not educated as an autonomous human being who merely happens to live among other people, but rather as a member of a certain collective. In the *Politics*, Aristotle makes clear that "education ought to be adapted to the particular form of the constitution" to ensure its continuity.[114] While this emphasis on community does not tell us much about the *content* of that community's norms and politics, which might be democratic or liberal, there is nevertheless an important sense in which it is politically conservative. As Bernard Yack puts it, the development of a disposition for lawfulness has "a conservative impact on politics, since whatever the regime in which it appears, it provides an internal barrier to social, political, and legal innovation".[115]

[109] Yack, p. 199.
[110] Ibid, p. 201.
[111] Ibid, p. 204.
[112] Aristotle, NE, 1180a.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1337a.
[115] Yack, p. 203.

This neo-Aristotelian social and political theory forms the basis of a conservative approach that conceptualizes education as the transmission of an *inheritance* by members of a community with a view to its preservation and persistence. Edmund Burke, the father of modern conservatism, gives these social ontological assumptions their classical conservative flavor. In the Burkean view, society is a partnership – in art, science, virtue, and "all perfection" – "between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born".[116] Without a sense of connection to *our* past as a political community, he argues, we feel no sense of responsibility for the present existence and future survival of the collective. This survival is crucial because for Burke, as for Aristotle, the community in which we find ourselves, with its norms and constraints, is precisely what enables us to lead a good human life. If political community is disrupted and the social fabric is "disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality", human beings are reduced to our "naked, shivering nature", ruled by base, barbarous impulses.[117]

This prospect of lawlessness, which Aristotle cautions against, is part of what motivates Burke's defense of prejudice. By 'prejudice' he means pre-formed, unexamined opinions and ways of acting. Even "the blindest prejudice" is much preferable to "the evils of inconstancy and versatility" that characterize a society with no recognized laws, norms, or customs.[118] Prejudice, in Burke's view, is not necessarily valuable because it is right, but rather because it is familiar to us. Hence, it enables us to interact in an orderly fashion. This is why political change and reform require the greatest caution and care: we "should approach to the faults of the state as to the wounds of a father, with pious and trembling solicitude".[119] At the same time, our prejudices contain our ancestors' accumulated wisdom and wealth of experience. Whatever remains of our past norms and institutions has survived historical trials and has likely been corrected and improved.[120]

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[116] Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the revolution in France*, ed. Frank M. Turner, New Haven: Yale University Press (2003), p. 82.
[117] Burke, p. 82, p. 66.
[118] Ibid, p. 82.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid, p. 146.

Weaving together the Aristotelian and Burkean threads, political philosopher Michael Oakeshott defines education as an intergenerational relation, a "transaction between human beings and postulants to a human condition in which newcomers are initiated into an inheritance of human achievements of understanding and belief".[121] The inheritance consists of beliefs, aspirations, sensibilities, as well as customs, practices, and activities. Such an inheritance is by definition particular and circumscribed, as opposed to universal and limitless. One cannot adopt all ways of seeing the world or go through experiences endowed with all human sensibilities. It is also not a set of general or "abstract aptitudes", transposable from one context to another, but rather a collection of "substantive expressions of thought, emotion, belief, opinion, approval and disapproval".[122] Children learn to like certain things but dislike others, to take pleasure in certain activities and be pained by others – attitudes and dispositions which eventually crystallize into a defined character.

Unlike the autonomous liberal subject, for whom the content of one's norms and beliefs is secondary to the goal of self-governance and self-direction, the conservative subject is defined by particularity – belonging to a particular culture, relating in particular ways to a particular community. The child becomes human by living in and through a particular culture, "learning to recognize some specific invitations to encounter particular adventures in human self-understanding".[123] Here, the implications of a different social ontology for conceptualizing education are readily apparent. In stark contrast with the claim that liberal theorists of education make about teaching how to think rather than what to think, conservatives understand that learning always means learning something in particular. The terms of any self-understanding and evaluation are culturally laden. Since there is no unified culture with a unified language and history,

[121] Oakeshott, Michael. "Education: The Engagement and Its Frustrations: 1972." In *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education* (Fuller, Timothy, ed.) Yale University Press, 1989, p. 66.
[122] Oakeshott, Michael. "A Place of Learning: 1975." In *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*. Yale University Press, 1989, p. 32.
[123] Oakeshott (1975), p. 29.

there is no universal inheritance that schools could pass down. As Oakeshott puts it, subtly deriding the liberal commitment to being neutral between conceptions of the good:

> Those who occupy [a place of learning] are not merely 'growing up', and they are not there merely to 'improve their minds' or to 'learn to think'; such unspecified activities are as impossible as an orchestra that plays no music in particular.[124]

Given the conservative framework's emphasis on particularity, it is no surprise that the particular *space* of education is of special importance as well. So where should education take place? While conservative theorists, much like liberal ones, start with a recognition of the family as a locus of early education and enculturation, they understand the school as the central institution of learning. Conservatives conceptualize the teacher as an expert educator who has a special relationship to students and their cultural inheritance. First, in order to pass down a particular inheritance, teachers must themselves be learned people, 'agents of civilization', displaying a nuanced and broad familiarity with the culture, as well as an understanding of how to transmit it.[125] Second, while parents might have some familiarity or even an advanced understanding of their culture as it is currently practiced, the inheritance also consists of much that might be forgotten or not currently in use.[126] This is why "the business of the teacher […] is to release his pupils from servitude to the current dominant feelings, emotions, images, ideas, beliefs and even skills […] by making available to him something which approximates more closely to the whole of his inheritance".[127] Finally, the teacher must value, appreciate, and believe in the worth of the inheritance she is transmitting or she "would have nothing to teach".[128] In other words, she must have a conservative attitude towards this inheritance, an attitude that the child's parents, guardians, or local community might not share. Insofar as the school is the sole institution in which the child can become the student of a teacher, the school is the central educational institution.

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[124] Ibid, p. 24.
[125] Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching: 1965." In *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*. Yale University Press, 1989, p. 48.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid, p. 48-49.
[128] Oakeshott (1965), p. 49.

In short, whereas for the liberal theorist of education the challenge is how to promote autonomy while remaining neutral between conceptions of the good, the conservative systematic approach aims at producing well-developed, virtuous, and flourishing members of communities who can preserve the cultural inheritance they receive. The role that individuality and the exercise of personal choice have to play in the conservative approach to education is greatly diminished. Instead, a conservative education aims at fulfilling the human need, in the words of Irving Babbitt, for "discipline and community of ideal". [129]

ii. The Evaluative Dimension of Conservative Theories of Education

Because of conservative theorists' emphasis on the particular community and culture, the central critiques of our contemporary system of education they advance concern the definition and boundaries of community, as well as the selection of the inheritance that is worth passing down intergenerationally. While for liberal theorists the state endorsing a particular conception of the good is a threat to the cultivation of autonomy, the conservative theorist starts from the premise that education necessarily transmits particular conceptions of the good as it habituates children to an inherited normative order. Hence, the central ways in which the educational system can fail to meet its fundamental purpose, in the conservative's view, is by not successfully selecting an inheritance to pass down or by selecting the wrong inheritance and therefore shaping the souls and characters of students in misguided ways.

Contemporary liberal schools have been criticized by conservative thinkers for undermining the very cultures they ought to promote. In his influential book on education, Allan Bloom denounces the 'closing of the American mind', which he diagnoses as the paradoxical symptom of the openness taught in American schools. The metaphor of closing represents the attitude towards learning that cultural and value relativism instill. Because they are taught that no

[129] Babbitt, Irving. *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities*, The University Press, Cambridge, 1908, p. 94.

culture is better than any other and hence that there is no one true or correct conception of the good, students no longer have the "real motive of education, the search for a good life".[130] Since there is no hope of getting closer to truths about morality or happiness, there is no real incentive to seek out the lessons that our own civilization and others have to offer. More recently, Patrick Deneen echoes this criticism when he argues that the dominant liberal educational paradigm is "an agent of anticulture", promoting a "cultureless multiculturalism" "insulated from the shaping force of culture as the exercise of living within nature and tradition".[131]

This 'openness of indifference', Bloom argues, can be contrasted with what should be an openness in the quest for knowledge, which consists in testing, revising, and updating one's worldview. However, one cannot pursue this quest without holding on to some prejudices – "the mind that has no prejudices at the outset is empty".[132] In response to Bloom, most liberal theorists would acknowledge that students enter all levels of schooling with beliefs and biases from their families and communities. This is why the liberal school must give them the tools for critical evaluation. But I take Bloom to be arguing against the idea that one can or should critically question *all* or even *most* of one's prejudices. Such an attempt leads to a lack of strong attachment to any particular conception of the good and the conviction that there are no right and wrong answers, giving students little reason to learn about and explore their own culture in any depth. The failure of the liberal educational system, according to Bloom and other conservatives, is that it undermines the very purpose of learning, namely the transmission of an inheritance with a view to the continuity of a culture.[133]

A similar critique is levied against the educational system by Hannah Arendt, who denounces the emphasis on play, student-centered learning, and children's autonomy in progressive education. According to Arendt, such an education fundamentally misunderstands the

[130] Bloom, Allan. *Closing of the American mind*. Simon and Schuster, 1987, p. 34.
[131] Deneen, Patrick J. *Why liberalism failed*. Yale University Press, 2019, p. 111.
[132] Ibid, p. 43.
[133] In Bloom's work, as well as Oakeshott and Babbitt's, there is an inner tension between the idea of cultural particularity and prejudice as necessary for the flourishing and development of human beings and the simultaneous belief that there are Platonic truths about the good life that we should seek to discover.

purpose of schooling: gradually introducing the new generations into an old, pre-existing world. This entails teaching them about our past and instilling a strong enough attachment to it for them to assume the "task of renewing a common world".[134] In lieu of an educational system governed by respect for the authority of tradition, our autonomy-centered education creates "a marketplace of studies driven by individual taste and preference".[135]

Beyond undermining the culture it is supposed to promote, education can also fail to fulfill its task by transmitting the wrong inheritance, forming children's character in ways that contravene culturally specific standards of virtue. One such criticism has been articulated by conservative thinkers against the reduction of contemporary schools to institutions for professionalization and specialization. Professional training institutions focus on the development of each child as "nothing but a role-performer", rather than a human being whose flourishing is an end in itself.[136] Oakeshott calls this narrowly utilitarian model of education 'socialization' or 'apprenticeship into adult life' and criticizes it for subordinating the good of students to social considerations of efficiency and the perpetuation of the "modern industrial and commercial society".[137] Russell Kirk similarly identifies the degradation of schools into 'degree mills' and 'employment agencies' as a betrayal of the ideal of education, namely the development of wisdom and virtue by teaching young persons "what it is to be a true human being, living within a moral order".[138] To be certain, this criticism is not unique to conservative theories of education; it can also take both liberal and democratic forms. The conservatives' critique of professionalization, however, distinguishes itself on the basis of what they claim is lost when schools focus on job training, namely students' cultural inheritance and habituation into a moral order.

In addition to the professionalization critique levied by conservative political thinkers, some conservative teachers, parents, and policy-makers attack contemporary U.S. schools for not

[134] Arendt, Hannah. "The Crisis in Education" (1954).
[135] Deneen, p. 116.
[136] Oakeshott (1975), p. 31.
[137] Oakeshott, "Education: The Engagement and Its Frustrations", p. 84.
[138] Kirk, Russell. *Redeeming the Time*. Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998, p. 43.

teaching what they perceive to be the tradition and inheritance that their children should be initiated in, namely Christianity. This has been the central focus of disputes surrounding the teaching of creationism, prayers in classrooms, and the content of sex education.[139] Unlike right-wing liberals who argue against parts of the curriculum because they violate the requirement of neutrality between conceptions of the good, conservatives who advance this critique are accusing public schools of teaching the wrong conception of the good, whether it involves evolution, secularism, or non-Christian sexual mores.

iii. The Programmatic Dimension of Conservative Theories of Education

Given conservatives' social ontology and their critiques of the existing system, how should habituation into the normative order proceed in schools? Which community's normative order should students be immersed in? Unlike the liberal program, which is focused on distribution and autonomy while attempting to be silent on which conception of the good it promotes, conservatives answer these questions about the good much more directly. The conservative program thus consists in prescriptions related to the inheritance that should shape the characters of future generations, as well as the methods and setting in which it is to be transmitted. While the conservative model for education is not dominant, many conservative schools exist, so their curricula and policies are a good starting point to map out the programmatic dimension.

In the American and British contexts, conservatives have proposed and developed an approach to education centered on a Judeo-Christian Western tradition going back to and emphasizing the Ancient Greeks and Romans. The focus on the culture of "the two great civilizations" goes all the way back to the Renaissance. This humanistic tradition of education became established in the modern schools founded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the *lycée* in France, the *Gymnasium* in Germany, and the Latin grammar school in England as well

[139] See, for example, Zimmerman, Jonathan. "Why the Culture Wars in Schools Are Worse Than Ever Before", *Politico*, September 19, 2021; Laats, Adam. "The Supreme Court Has Ushered In a New Era of Religion at School", The Atlantic, July 15, 2022.

as the colonial United States.[140] A more recent version of this program is the 'Great Books' school system established in the 1940s by Mortimer Adler and Robert Maynard Hutchins. Their curriculum introduces students to the 'Great Conversation' of the Western canon through a selection of books taken to be representative of its most important ideas and topics.[141]

Crucially for the conservative educational theorist, the purpose of an education through classic texts is not the accumulation of knowledge or the widening of one's cultural repertoire, but rather the assimilation of a particular inheritance as one's own. As Babbitt remarks, "culture itself should not be regarded as complete until it has penetrated its possessor as to become part of its character".[142] In other words, the point of a conservative education is not historical knowledge, but rather participation in a civilization and the perpetuation of a community of value and virtue. Although critical of some elements of the Great Books approach, Bloom also endorses a curriculum centered on classical texts that encourage self-reflection and a critical understanding of one's cultural background. By acquainting them with the big questions of existence and the various answers that have been provided, Bloom suggests, a classical education "feeds the student's love of truth and passion to live a good life".[143]

The conservative educational program is thus avowedly centered on inculcating certain values and dispositions. Education should save children and students from a total absorption in the present moment by instilling in them reverence and respect for the past.[144] The impression that one is alone and that each individual must fashion a vision of the good life for themselves is indicative of a lack of reverence for the tradition to which one belongs. According to Babbitt, this reverence for the past can only be taught by showing students the continuity of the tradition, bridging the gap between the Ancient Greeks and Romans and the modern and contemporary

[140] Edwards, Newton, and Herman G. Richey. *The School in the American Social Order,* Second Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963 [1947], p. 8.
[141] https://www.greatbooks.org/nonprofit-organization/history/
[142] Babbitt, p. 162.
[143] Bloom, p. 344-345.
[144] Babbitt, p. 166.

world.[145] The teacher should aim to not merely distribute knowledge, but to "lodge" it in the students, to "marry it to them and make it a part of their very minds and souls".[146] An attitude of receptivity is required if these classic texts are to shape the minds and characters of children in the manner that conservative thinkers prescribe.

This connects to another disposition central to the conservative approach to education, namely respect for authority. First, the canonical texts and authors are authoritative, meaning their value is posited as a precondition for their selection and students are taught to approach them with trust and faith that they contain great insights. Second, and equally important, is the authority of teachers. Unlike the liberal theorist of education, whose concern for autonomy makes the submission of children to authority a troubling exception, the conservative's emphasis on order and the rule of law and prejudice sets the stage for an even more thoroughgoing emphasis on adults' authority over children.[147] Discipline and order in the classroom are understood as preconditions for the possibility of learning. Arendt, for example, emphasizes this element of education when she argues that education "cannot forgo either authority or tradition".[148] Teachers must have authority in order to pass on a certain inheritance to their students.[149]

Given the items on the conservative educational agenda, it is clear that the state need not be the only or even main authority in the educational system. In most societies, conservative schools teaching both religious and 'Great Books' curricula have in fact emerged as alternatives to the public system (often as private or charter institutions). This is not a recent phenomenon – the early colonial educational tradition in the United States embraced the Anglican belief that education is "a private or religious function and no proper concern of the state", and even that the

[145] Ibid, p. 167-168.
[146] Ibid, p. 102, citing Montaigne.
[147] Babbitt identifies Rousseau's "horror of every form of discipline and constraint" as one of the sources of liberal education's improper establishment of authority in the classroom (p. 49).
[148] Arendt, "The Crisis in Education".
[149] Ibid.

school should be a "handmaiden of the church".[150] In the past few decades, an association has developed between the American religious right and the homeschooling movement.[151]

Nevertheless, there are also grounds to oppose private and religious education from a classical conservative perspective. The teacher as a person with expertise in the tradition, as well as the school as a special site dedicated solely to learning, are central to many conservative educational theories. In the words of Oakeshott:

> […] school and university are places apart where a declared learner is emancipated from the limitations of his local circumstances and from the wants he may happen to have acquired, and is moved by intimations of what he has never yet dreamed. He finds himself invited to pursue satisfactions he has never yet imagined or wished for. They are, then, sheltered places where excellences may be heard because the din of local partialities is no more than a distant rumble. They are places where a learner is initiated into what there is to be learned.[152]

iv. The Central Merits and Limitations of Conservative Theories of Education

Conservative systematic theories of education make certain improvements over liberal ones with respect to their social theoretical foundations. Unlike liberal educational theorists, they acknowledge that individuals are constituted by particular social and political communities, whose cultures shape the conceptions of the good that individuals form. We are therefore never the sole authors of our conceptions of the good and life paths. As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, we are 'drafted' into preexisting roles in scripted stories that enable us to act in culturally intelligible ways, whether by conforming to, reinterpreting, or defying expectations.[153] But in spite of this recognition of our social formation, the conservative social ontology and methodology are still insufficient for fully describing and analyzing the role of education within the social and economic

[150] Edwards and Richey, p. 12-13.
[151] Some conservative Christian parents, especially evangelicals, organized through associations such as the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), to push for parental rights over their children's education and withdraw their children from public schools that did not teach the religious tradition they favor. (See, for example, Dowland, Seth. "Evangelical Homeschooling and the Development of "Family Values"", *Berkeley Forum*, December 18, 2019; Olmstead, Molly. "How the Christian Home-Schooling Lobby Feeds on Fear of Public Schools", Slate, June 15, 2022; Brown, Heath. *Homeschooling the Right: How Conservative Education Activism Erodes the State*. Columbia University Press, 2021.)
[152] Oakeshott (1975), p. 24.
[153] MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. U of Notre Dame Press [1984]: 2007, p. 216-220.

system. In this section I argue that inadequacies of the conservative social theory prevent the realization of the conservative goal of education. More specifically, because they take as a given the existence of unified traditions and cultures and are insensitive to questions of power differentials and conflict among subgroups, conservative theorists are prevented from forming virtuous community members invested in perpetuating their cultures.

Most conservatives writing on education start with an assumption that no longer holds true in the contemporary world, namely that social and political communities are characterized by cultural unity and homogeneity.[154] In reality, there are very few, if any, communities in which all children have the same cultural inheritance. If we were to actually carry out the conservative program, there would be no common schools, since cultural and religious groups (and perhaps even families) would have to self-segregate to pass on their cultural inheritance. In reality, most religious and cultural enclave schools are not homogenous – many students who attend Catholic schools, for example, are not Catholics. Even within the family, the task of selecting a tradition would often prove to be intractable, given the increasing prevalence of multiracial, multiethnic, interfaith families. This is a problem for conservatives given their steadfast commitment to providing education at a communal level. Ironically, the conservative program would lead to the dissolution of communities.

In other words, the conservative theorist assumes that each political community can easily identify and teach *their* cultural inheritance or tradition. But what usually happens is rather different; particular cultural inheritances are chosen and endorsed by dominant groups or cultural elites and the cultures of oppressed or minority groups are either ignored or marginalized. If we understand our individual and collective identities as dialogically formed, through processes of 'recognition', then the lack of equal recognition towards certain groups and individuals is oppressive. As Charles Taylor remarks, "[t]he projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort

[154] MacIntyre, Alaisdair. "Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative and the philosophy of science." *The Monist* (1977): 453-472.

and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized".[155] Given the conservative emphasis on particularity, neither neutrality nor multiculturalism in education are available options. But conservatives should in principle be very concerned about the loss of tradition and cultural inheritance for these minority groups.

Artificially selecting a particular cultural or religious tradition in heterogeneous and diverse communities, as some contemporary schools attempt to, is inherently rationalist and hence anticonservative. Traditions lose their meaning as traditions if they are chosen on their cultural or intellectual merits. The whole point of a conservative education is that students develop reverence and respect for a particular civilization, its history and its values, because it is *their own*, rather than because it is useful or superior to the alternatives.

Conservative theories nevertheless promote a good that many liberal and democratic theorists of education pay relatively little attention to, namely 'prejudices' (in the Burkean sense described) that anchor and enable any process of subject formation. One need not be a political conservative to recognize the force of this argument. Bloom's notion of the 'openness of indifference' can be found in Nietzsche's condemnation of an education lacking cultural horizons, which disables original thought and the development of one's own taste and sensibilities.[156] By 'horizons' he means limits to one's cultural exposure, experiences, and familiarization. Attempting to identify with or value every civilization, as some liberals and multicultural democrats seem to suggest, leads to a lack of particular attachments and therefore the impossibility of forming a cultural identity. While I do not endorse the uncritical valuation of one's cultural inheritance simply because it is one's own, I do think that all theories of education must grapple with the need for horizons. We need not abandon the study of Greek and Roman classics or the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, I will argue, an emancipatory education requires, in Roberto Unger's words,

[155] Taylor, Charles. "The Politics of Recognition" in Gutmann, Amy, ed. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton university Press, 1994, p. 36.
[156] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the advantage and disadvantage of history for life*. Hackett Publishing, [1874]: 1980.

the "imaginative enlargement of the number of our canons and change in the character of their relation to our creative freedom".[157]

The Democratic Systematic Theory of Education

i. The Positive Dimension – Democratic Social Theory

Democratic social theory starts from some of the same ontological and methodological premises as liberalism. It gives priority to the individual and understands political society, its institutions and practices, as ultimately explicable in terms of individuals' behaviors and attitudes. However, the democratic theorist proposes a distinct moral and social psychology of individuals, consisting of different capacities, dispositions, and inclinations. Human beings are best understood not as Hobbesian self-interested rational agents or as autonomous Kantian moral subjects, but rather as cooperative beings endowed with reason, and hence capable of establishing and negotiating the terms of their joint endeavors. In Aristotle's words, we are political beings because we are endowed with the capacity for *logos* or reasoned speech, which allows us to form normative communities.[158] This is meant to be an empirically grounded claim. As John Dewey argues, far from demonstrating individuals' egoistic or antisocial character, the history and existence of human communities provides good evidence that we are "chiefly interested…in entering into the activities of others and taking part in conjoint and cooperative doings".[159]

By emphasizing that the terms of our social and political intercourse are the result of deliberation and mutual justification, democratic theorists point to a slightly different conception of autonomy from that of liberalism, namely autonomy as *collective self-governance*. Liberal philosophers characterize individuals primarily by their capacity to bind their own wills by moral norms. By contrast, democratic theorists' account of freedom centers the collective ability of

[157] Unger, Roberto Mangabeira. *Democracy realized: The progressive alternative*. Verso, 2000, p. 234.
[158] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a10-11.
[159] Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education* (1916), Penn state electronic classics series publication (2001), p. 28.

citizens to come up with and constantly revise the terms of their cooperation.[160] Democratic theories also emphasize a different conception of rationality. In his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Jürgen Habermas suggests that we can understand human beings as endowed with 'communicative rationality', which consists in the ability to justify one's assertions and actions by appeal to established norms and expectations.[161] Any form of government that is based on external imposition and coercive control is unsuitable to beings who have this capacity for rational, collective self-governance.

Democracy, understood in the most general terms as a "mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience", substitutes external authority for voluntary participation grounded in shared interests.[162] According to the democratic theorist, this is the only political organization properly calibrated to human nature. In their account of deliberative democracy, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson argue that democratic forms of government are primarily characterized by the giving of reasons and mutual justification of decisions about the governance of society.[163] Whether democracy takes direct or representative institutional forms, it needs citizens who are able to give each other reasons and appeal to mutually comprehensible principles to justify decisions to one another.[164] Deliberative democracy starts with one of the main assumptions of liberal theory, namely that there is and always will be reasonable disagreements about values and norms, which inform contradictory ways of living one's life and organizing society. The case for deliberative democracy centers on the promise of making our collective political decisions most justifiable in light of such disagreement by means of respectful, public-spirited deliberation.[165]

To be sure, there are disagreements among deliberative democracy theorists on whether the goal of deliberative processes is consensus or democratic pluralism, as well as on which substantive values deliberation should rely. But the approach as a whole can be fruitfully contrasted

[160] Gutmann, Amy, and Dennis Thompson. *Why deliberative democracy?*. Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 3.
[161] Habermas, Jürgen. *The theory of communicative action: Volume 1: Reason and the rationalization of society*. Beacon press, 1985, p. 10, 15.
[162] Dewey, p. 91.
[163] Gutmann and Thompson, p. 3.
[164] Ibid, p. 4-5.
[165] Gutmann and Thompson, p. 10-11.

with aggregative democracy theories, which consider any outcome resulting from a fair procedure for aggregating individual preferences, such as a majority vote, as *ipso facto* justified.[166] Aggregative approaches implicitly rely on liberal assumptions about the priority of individual interests and the ultimate purposes of government. Such assumptions are inadequate from the perspective of deliberative democracy theorists who think that our forms of government should be primarily based on reasoning together about the good. This requires subjecting every aspect of our political lives, including our political decision-making procedures, to deliberative scrutiny.

The function of education within the democratic paradigm is to form children into democratic citizens by developing their capacity for reasoned deliberation and their cooperative dispositions. This entails fostering their critical thinking and argumentation skills as well as transmitting the knowledge necessary to effectively participate in democratic politics. Democratic theories' requirements about the content of education are also much more robust than those of liberalism. They do not purport to be value-neutral or to only endorse autonomy as a value. Democratic principles and norms inform educational processes, as well as the standards for evaluating the performance of our current systems of education. Good democratic citizens, in this view, should value the inclusive, accessible, public nature of deliberation.

Danielle Allen describes the function of education as '*participatory readiness*' – an umbrella term that includes preparation for action in "every domain for which it matters who makes the decisions that define our collective lives", most notably civic and political activities.[167] Allen writes that participatory readiness relies on the cultivation of three kinds of capacities: i) verbal skills, including exegetical and expressive capacities that allow citizens to interpret the political world, describe it, and articulate calls to action that can persuade others; ii) democratic knowledge or the 'science and art of association', which includes the ability to bond with others based on affinities

[166] Gutmann and Thompson, p. 15-16.
[167] Allen, Danielle. "Education and equality." In *Education and Equality*. University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 29.

as well as form relations that bridge social differences; and iii) understanding the mechanics of political change, both in democratic institutions of government and other political arenas.[168]

As for the question of who has legitimate authority over the education of children, democratic theorists give a straightforward answer. Schools are arenas of democratic politics. Parents, teachers, and other citizens should collectively decide what to teach and how to organize schools to best fulfill their collective visions. While parents have special interests and rights with respect to their own children, children are also members of a democratic political community and hence must be prepared to have a say in processes of social reproduction.[169] Mandatory public schooling that is under democratic control is therefore necessary for education to fulfill its proper function. Democratic theorists agree that "the broad distribution of educational authority among citizens, parents, and professional educators supports the core value of democracy".[170] This is an important point of difference with most liberal and conservative approaches, which are not in principle opposed to private schools or homeschooling.

Democratic decisions on what children should be taught in schools are not neutral between conceptions of the good. But deliberative democrats are not content to recognize any and all decisions about education reached through democratic processes as legitimate. In this sense, the commitment to democracy is not purely procedural. It includes a series of democratic values that ensure deliberation is possible to begin with. In order to arrive at mutually justifiable decisions in diverse communities, citizens must also hold "values like religious tolerance, inclusivity, and racial equality".[171] Thus, schools in a democratic society give present citizens the chance to deliberate about education, as well as ensure that deliberation remains inclusive and that future citizens are able to join in, which requires instilling democratic values in students.

[168] Allen, p. 40-43.
[169] Gutmann, Amy. *Democratic education*. Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 42.
[170] Gutmann, p. 42.
[171] Ibid, p. 40.

ii. The Evaluative Dimension – Democratic Systematic Theory

The educational system falls short of performing its function, according to democratic theorists if it fails to promote or consolidate the existing democratic order. This happens whenever schools do not show equal concern for the formation and development of all students or are misguided about what promotes citizens' participatory readiness. Democratic theorists advance both kinds of critique, sometimes simultaneously, against our contemporary educational systems. They denounce the unjust distribution of education, which effectively breaks down the function of the school as a space of democratic politics and training future citizens. Likewise, they criticize the content of school curricula for either paying insufficient attention to the cultivation of democratic virtues or for misinterpreting democratic value requirements.

On the distributive side, contemporary educational systems fail to fulfill their mission as conceived by democratic theorists because they are highly fragmented along racial and socioeconomic lines. Racial and economic school segregation in the U.S., for example, has been increasing for the past few decades, in large part reversing the progress in desegregation achieved in the era following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The share of intensely segregated minority schools, i.e. schools in which Black, Latino, or other non-white populations make up 90-100% of the student body, has tripled since 1988.[172] These minority schools exhibit 'double segregation' – they are not only enclaves of non-white students, but overwhelmingly poor, as measured by the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.[173]

These patterns of racial and economic segregation are troubling to democratic theorists for a few reasons. First, in the highly fragmented U.S. public school district system, intensely segregated minority schools also tend to be underfunded and to therefore provide a much lower quality of education to their students. By devaluing their entitlement or right to education, the public system is *de facto* treating some of its citizens as second-class. As I noted above, this injustice

[172] Frankenberg, Erica, Jongyeon Ee, Jennifer B. Ayscue, and Gary Orfield. "Harming our common future: America's segregated schools 65 years after Brown." (2019), p. 21.
[173] Ibid, p. 23.

is also effectively pointed out and addressed by liberal theorists in their distributive justice critiques. But democratic theorists' evaluation is distinct in its emphasis on the fact that underserving students also amounts to failing to form them *as democratic citizens*.

As Meira Levinson argues, Black, Latino, and immigrant students, and in particular the poorest students in these groups, experience a 'civic empowerment gap'. In a parallel fashion to the racial and economic gaps in achievement, these students "perform significantly worse on standardized tests and surveys of civic knowledge and skills than White, Asian, native-born, and middle-class students do".[174] Although participatory readiness is not confined to the knowledge of democratic political processes and institutions that such tests often measure, such knowledge is certainly necessary for being actively engaged in political life. The repercussions of a lack of civic empowerment and citizenship training in schools reverberate throughout the lives of adults in the form of disparities in civic and political involvement, from voting and membership in political parties to involvement in political protest.[175]

In addition to failing its mission of 'leaving no citizen behind', to paraphrase Levinson, the highly segregated and fragmented contemporary school system erodes the democratic character of the polity. The lack of participatory readiness results in a less democratic political decision-making process. For theorists who understand education as primarily aimed at making us good deliberators so that we can collectively govern our lives, this is a fundamental indictment of the educational system. The inability to follow and reflect on the political world, as well as a lack of motivation to even vote, result in diminished collective autonomy. For many citizens, the terms of their political lives end up being heteronomous or externally imposed.

But the erosion of democracy is not perpetuated only through the inadequate training of a large portion of citizens in schools. Public schools themselves serve as arenas of democratic politics, in which community members deliberate about the common good and form bonds of

[174] Levinson, Meira. *No citizen left behind*. Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 32.
[175] Ibid, p. 34.

social and political solidarity. Debating with each other about school policy, as well as meeting in a public space for a wide range of communal activities, from political debates to cultural events, are essential parts of democratic societies that are greatly imperiled by an educational system segregated along class and race lines. Public schools have been empirically shown to "strengthen social ties" and "foster cohesion not only among students but also among adults – parents, alumni, educators, and local community members".[176] Lack of involvement in and responsibility for the fate of citizens, especially of other racial and class backgrounds, are therefore inimical to the spirit of democratic politics. Dewey articulates this spirit most eloquently, writing:

> What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy. All that society has accomplished for itself is put, through the agency of the school, at the disposal of its future members. All its better thoughts of itself it hopes to realize through the new possibilities thus opened to its future self. Here individualism and socialism are at one. Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself.[177]

I interpret him not as suggesting that education policy should be shaped by the most enlightened parents, but that the whole community should be as committed to the flourishing of all children as the best parents are to the flourishing of theirs. Segregated and fragmented schools both run contrary to this commitment.

Finally, according to democratic theorists, contemporary schools are failing with respect to the content of education. This happens in underserved minority schools, as well as in many predominantly white, wealthy schools with high rates of academic achievement. Most democratic education curricula take the form of the traditional 'how a bill becomes law' introduction to the mechanics of government, which does not come even close to covering the range of capacities required for participatory readiness.[178] Moreover, beyond the insufficient content of civic education, schools fail their democratic mission when they violate what democratic theorists like

[176] Fay, Jacob, Meira Levinson, Allison Stevens, Harry Brighouse, Tatiana Geron, and P. Fellow. "Schools during the COVID-19 pandemic: Sites and sources of community resilience." *Harvard University: Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics* (2020), p. 17.
[177] Dewey, John. *The Child and the Curriculum and The School and Society, Introd. by Leonard Carmichael*. UChicago Press, 1968, p. 7.
[178] Allen, p. 40.

Gutmann call the 'principle of nonrepression', which "prohibits educational authorities from shielding students from reasonable (not correct or uncontroversial) political views represented by adult citizenry".[179] Current policies that seem to violate this principle include the banning of books from curricula, as well as certain ways of teaching religious and sexual education.

iii. The Programmatic Dimension – Democratic Theories of Education

In order to function as training grounds for democratic citizens, schools must first and foremost commit to providing all students with comprehensive participatory readiness, with no distinction based on morally arbitrary facts such as race, gender, religion, or economic background. Many democratic theories therefore share the distributive justice focus of liberal theories of education, but provide different definitions of the goods being distributed as well as the criterion of distribution. One democratic interpretation of the ideal of equal opportunity relies on an adequacy threshold: schools should teach "all educable children […] enough to participate effectively in the democratic process" and the democratic community should "determine the nature of schooling above the threshold".[180] The requirement of schooling for democratic participation is itself subject to public deliberation and evaluated through democratic principles of justice.

Nevertheless, unlike their liberal counterparts, democratic theorists are committed to a particular form of government being an inextricable component of the good life, which allows them to impose more robust limits on individual rights and liberties. For example, a democratic case for the mandatory desegregation of public schools has been made on the basis of democratic commitments. Some democratic theorists argue that court-mandated desegregation can be justified by appeal to the function of schooling in deliberative democracies, namely the formation of

[179] Gutmann, p. 98.

[180] Gutmann, p. 170. She also suggests a criterion for the distribution of education beyond this adequacy: "inequalities in the distribution of educational goods can be justified if, but only if, they do not deprive any child of the ability to participate effectively in the democratic process (which determines, among other things, the priority of education relative to other social goods)." (p. 136)

citizens and the maintenance of democracy. Gutmann, for example, shows that integrated schools are essential to a democratic citizenry because they have been shown to reduce racial prejudice, promote mutual respect among citizens from diverse backgrounds, and increase minority achievement.[181] Moreover, as the previous section argued, integrated schools are a crucial space for building ties of social and political solidarity among all members of a community. Given that deliberative democracy is about more than just the aggregation of individual preferences, even when a majority of citizens oppose desegregation efforts democratic theorists and policymakers can argue that the demands of justice need not "give way to liberalism".[182]

But integration is not reducible to enrolling more Black, Latino, or poor students into predominantly White schools or more economically privileged districts. This conception of integration, proposed by some liberal theorists and policy makers, fails to capture the main democratic insight about the function of education. Lawrence Blum and Zoë Burkholder, for example, argue against the 'integrationist' ideal that seeks to solve racial injustices by simply bringing disadvantaged students of color in close proximity with their more advantaged White peers. They point out that this ideal fails to recognize that segregation is an effect of broader class and race-based injustice, rather than its cause. Integration efforts must therefore center civic and democratic education – including civic knowledge, the elimination of bias and prejudice, as well as fostering cross-racial relations that are likely to result in democratic bonds of solidarity.[183]

Some democratic theorists also argue against the existence of private schools or any other form of educational fragmentation that threatens democracy. Given the inequalities they create between students by allowing wealthy families to opt out of the public system, which leads to diminished political incentives to invest in public schools, there is a strong case to be made for the

[181] Gutmann, p. 163.
[182] Ibid, p. 167.
[183] Blum, Lawrence, and Zoë Burkholder. *Integrations: The struggle for racial equality and civic renewal in public education*. University of Chicago Press, 2021. Elizabeth Anderson similarly argues that when properly executed, integration has important effects on the strength of democratic institutions. For example, participating in integrated social spaces expands democratic decision makers' sense of accountability "to citizens from all walks of life, so that they take pains to make policies they can justify to all" (Anderson, Elizabeth. *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 134).

total prohibition of private schools.[184] This argument rejects liberal considerations about parents' rights to control their children's learning because "democratic education is a shared trust of parents and the polity", whose function is incompatible with giving parents too much power.[185]

Finally, the democratic program includes reforms related to aspects of contemporary curricula that violate the demands of democratic justice. Given that democracy is defined in deliberative terms, one democratic criterion for any restrictions of educational content is the principle of non-repression. This principle prevents educational authorities "from restricting rational deliberation of competing conceptions of the good life and good society".[186] For example, insofar as it imposes a particular sectarian religious worldview on children, the inclusion of creationism as a scientific explanation in school curricula limits the possibility of children to participate in rational deliberations with other democratic citizens.[187] The same could be said about recent laws in the United States concerning the banning of "divisive" concepts and ideas identified with Critical Race Theory or gender studies, most of which are crucial to understanding and critically analyzing the society in which students live. In fact, a democratic case could be made that learning about gender and racial injustice, their nature and origins, is part of the participatory readiness that democratic theorists support.

iv. The Central Merits and Limitations of Democratic Theories of Education

Democratic approaches that conceptualize human beings as deliberative political animals are a fruitful socio-theoretical starting point for both the evaluation and rethinking of our contemporary systems of education. The normative tools that the democratic theorist has at her disposal enable a much more capacious critique and a more ambitious program than those of either liberal or conservative theorists of education. Nonetheless, I argue in this section, democratic

[184] Gutmann, p. 116.
[185] Ibid. The one democratic argument that could be made in favor of maintaining certain private schools, according to Gutmann, would be based on allowing religious private schools to exist, on the condition that they live up the commitment to teaching the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for the development of democratic citizens (p. 117-118).
[186] Gutmann, p. 98.
[187] Ibid, p. 104.

theorists' social ontological and methodological starting points prevent them from identifying two of the main impediments to the formation of democratic citizens. I am referring here to the limitations of democracy as a form of governance within *capitalist* democracies and the resulting ideological barriers to the efficacy of citizenship training or education for participatory readiness.[188]

With respect to the problems of democracy within capitalist democracies, as Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers have argued, the political rights of citizens in capitalist democracies are "formal or procedural, not substantive".[189] Material inequalities, viz. one's share of wealth and resources, inevitably place differential constraints on the effective exercise of political rights.[190] The picture of democratic citizens deliberating in the public sphere is consequently far removed from the political reality in which some citizens have only their voice and others own the newspapers they read, the television stations they watch, and fund the political campaigns of the candidates they can choose among.

The second constraint on the substantive exercise of political rights relates to the economic rationality encouraged by capitalism. Because of the materially insecure conditions in which they live, most workers will choose to focus their political activity on short-term incremental improvements in their material conditions. This limited time horizon is perfectly rational for any given individual. The problem is that capitalist democracies create a mismatch between the agential and structural levels. Long-term structural changes that would make society more just and more conducive to flourishing do not appear as worth prioritizing politically from an individual perspective. Thus, deliberation about the broader economic system, which would result in more radical political struggle, is effectively precluded.[191] The interests that prevail consequently tend to

[188] John Dewey stands out as a democratic proponent of education who understands, to a certain extent, the embeddedness of the school as well as of democratic government in a particular economic system. Although he does not discuss to great lengths the implication of this insight for education, he argues that "[…] the life which men, women and children actually lead, the opportunities open to them, the values they are capable of enjoying, their education, their share in all the things of art and science, are mainly determined by economic conditions. Hence we can hardly expect a moral system which ignores economic conditions to be other than remote and empty" (Dewey, J. The quest for certainty. New York, Minton, Balch (1929), Chapter X: "The Construction of Good").

[189] Cohen, Joshua, and Joel Rogers. *On democracy: Towards a transformation of American society*. Penguin Books (1984), p. 50.

[190] Ibid, p. 51.

[191] Cohen and Rogers, p. 54-55.

be those aligned with the preservation of this system and material inequalities. For these reasons, a commitment to centering school curricula on participatory readiness is bound to be limited. Democratic citizens are indeed being prepared for their future participation in democratic processes, but the level and quality of their participation are systemically constrained.

Because they do not account for these dimensions of the political system, democratic theorists are also not attentive to the ideological beliefs and behaviors that the school as an institution reproduces. Much like in the case of liberalism, democratic theories' atomist social ontology and focus on individual explanations are insufficient for critiquing subject formation processes in schools. Our political practices are going to continue supporting the unjust economic and political order that democratic theorists do not sufficiently account for, namely capitalism. Even if we could deliberate about the political norms of our communities on equal footing in the public sphere, the conclusions reached would likely be favorable to the present social, political, and economic arrangements. In other words, if we do not account for the nature of the economic system that democracy operates in, we cannot possibly hope to avoid its reproduction. The social ontological focus on individual citizens is therefore inadequate for promoting a functioning participatory democracy.

Thus, democratic principles of justice are insufficient for critically analyzing the making and remaking of an unjust economic and political system behind the 'official curriculum'. As Michael Apple argues, for example, theories that are not attuned to how the content of education is shaped by the broader economic conditions are unlikely to understand or explain the fact that schools inculcate dispositions like obedience, restraint, and the acceptance of a high degree of arbitrariness.[192] No amount of civic education or democratic knowledge can counteract the formation of subjects in this manner. Instead, all classroom practices and subjects being taught must be scrutinized and reimagined.

[192] Apple, M. *Ideology and Curriculum*. New York: Routledge ([1979]: 2019 fourth ed.), p. 50-60.

Concluding Remarks

The arguments of this chapter advanced on two levels: a metatheoretical proposal and a series of first-order immanent critiques. At the metatheoretical level, I articulated what I take to be the main political theories of education – liberal, conservative, and democratic – in terms of three systematically interlinked dimensions of analysis. The first dimension, the positive social theory, is not explicitly discussed by most theorists of education, let alone by educational policymakers. By reconstructing each of these theories from their social ontological assumptions to their normative critiques and all the way to their policy proposals, I have shown that social ontology is not only a part of political thinking of education, but the foundation that helps explain some of the deepest theoretical and political disagreements. While a theory's social ontology does not rigidly determine its political commitments, it plays a profound shaping role. As I hope to have shown, we cannot understand the depth and breadth of our first-order political disagreements without unearthing these social ontological assumptions.

Furthermore, the articulation of the evaluative and programmatic dimensions of the theories in connection with their social ontological assumptions reveals something important about our political debates. Even when we agree that freedom is a worthwhile aim or the central goal of education, for example, what we mean by 'freedom' differs radically depending on our social ontological starting points. This became clear through the contrast between liberal and democratic conceptions of autonomy. For this reason, what it takes to realize freedom politically and to operationalize it in schools through public policy is going to be very different according to each of these theories. The lack of clarity about the sources of agreement and disagreement is once again underscored by the reconstruction of social ontological assumptions.

On the second level of analysis, that of first-order critique, I have argued that none of the systematic theories I reconstruct in this chapter can provide a satisfactory account of or political program for education. I have assumed the goal identified by each theory of education and shown

that its achievement is impeded by a series of internal tensions or inconsistencies. The upshot of this type of critique is not that the realization of the goals is more difficult than these theorists might have thought. Instead, it suggests that they need to rethink some of their fundamental social theoretical assumptions if their priority is the success of their political programs. Thus, both conservative and democratic theory provide valuable critiques of the dominant liberal framework, but neither can succeed on its own. This is because their stated goals for education are not and cannot be realized given the inadequacies of their social theories, in particular their social ontological starting points.

So what is to be done if all the social ontological pictures these theories propose are flawed or inaccurate? The next chapter takes this challenge seriously and attempts to construct a systematic approach to education based on a different social ontology. I argue that critical theoretical analyses of society as a complex dynamic system are the best starting point for moving forward in thinking about education. While thus far I have remained agnostic on the relative value of educational goals of liberal, conservative, and democratic theories, I aim to show that some of them can be retained, and more importantly realized, within the critical theory of education I propose.

Chapter II
Critical Theories of Education

I argued in the previous chapter that the dominant theories of education – liberal, conservative, and democratic – fail to offer satisfactory accounts of or programs for education. Their incomplete and inaccurate social ontologies prevent them from realizing their own goals. However, these three theories do not exhaust the conceptual space of educational theory and practice. This chapter introduces and discusses the main insights of a fourth type of approach: *critical theories of education*.

I excluded critical theories from Chapter I for a few reasons. First, this category of views is simply not as influential, especially in the realm of education as the others. This is partly because few thinkers in the critical theory tradition write explicitly on education. Second, when they do write on education, critical theorists rely on alternative methodologies which generate categorically distinct questions and goals. Most theories of education start by asking what the goals of education are and how the educational system should consequently be organized. Critical theories, however, start from different questions: What role or function does the educational system play in this particular social system, under these specific political and economic conditions? How do schools contribute to perpetuating an oppressive and unjust social system? The answers provided are rooted in and informed by a critical perspective on existing social relations and struggles, rather than in largely ahistorical, general accounts of the nature and goals of education. Through their analysis, critical theorists seek to bring about a new social order by raising consciousness about schools' role in social reproduction. In other words, the focus of these theories is not on the school as a standalone institution, but as a particularly important *subsystem* in a larger process of social reproduction.

Although their diagnoses and social theories differ in some respects, this approach is shared by most critical theorists of education. Drawing on a long tradition from Hegel and Marx

to present day, I argue that the main *positive* and *evaluative* insights of this approach are twofold.[1] First, it proposes an illuminating critique of ideology and the role of the school in the reproduction of the broader system. Second, it offers a theory of 'interpellation' or the formation of subjects into existing social classes and positions.

Critical theories also differ from the dominant approaches at the *programmatic* level. Unlike the liberal, conservative, and democratic views, critical prescriptions are developed not only on the basis of their social theory and evaluations but also out of existing social movements' demands and goals. More specifically, the critical theorist aims to clarify existing struggles with the goal of furthering consciousness-raising and mobilization.[2] For that reason, their vision for what schools ought to be is typically quite radical, attacking the root of the injustices, distortions, and pathologies that plague our society. In short, the critical theorist of education attempts to reimagine the system of education by drawing on grassroots initiative and creativity, rather than simply tinker with its present structure to better fit some abstract ideals.

Despite these methodological and substantive differences, critical theories of education can still be systematized in terms of the dimensions I developed in Chapter I (positive, evaluative, prescriptive). The focus of this chapter is on doing precisely that. My goal is not to suggest that critical theories have all the answers to the questions that liberal, conservative, and democratic, approaches struggle with. While they are promising in many ways, I nevertheless argue that critical theories of education also have distinct limitations. In particular, their social theory is more compelling than the dominant views', but it is not properly connected to the programmatic side. As I will explain, this is owed, in part, to the division of labor within critical theory. Although it is possible to talk about critical *theories* of education along the three dimensions I developed, rarely do particular critical *theorists* address all three. In fact, some theorists deny that it is their role to

[1] Unlike the dominant views, the social ontology of critical theories rejects the fact/value distinction. I elaborate this point in the methodology section of this chapter.
[2] My reconstruction of liberal, conservative, and democratic theories of education in the previous chapter is *itself* an exercise in critical theory insofar as I treat them as social and political practices with tensions and inconsistencies that I aim to make apparent.

speak to the programmatic dimension at all. Hence, composing a systematic critical theory of education entails combining ideas from different thinkers who share certain methodological aims and political goals.

I. The Positive Dimension of Critical Theories of Education

A. The Methodology of Critical Theories of Education

The political theories of education I articulate and systematize in this study can be understood as organized bodies of answers to particular questions.[3] Liberal, conservative, and democratic systematic approaches to education explicitly ask evaluative and prescriptive questions about education – "What are the goals of our system of education?" and "How should we try to realize these goals in our schools?". Part of my aim in the first chapter was to show that *in doing so* they also necessarily rely on more fundamental social theoretical questions, such as "What is a human being?" and "What is society?". The answers to these questions shape all the other aspects of their theories.

Critical theorists, on the other hand, self-consciously start from these fundamental social theoretical questions. They do so in a distinctive fashion. Part of what makes a critical inquiry *critical* is that it seeks to give empirically adequate explanations that go "beyond merely describing the world".[4] As Rahel Jaeggi puts it, this method bridges the gap between analysis and critique: "the idea is to criticize a state of affairs by analyzing it – in the sense that the analysis is not just an instrumental precondition of critique, but itself part of the critical process".[5] More specifically, critical theorists analyze the social world so as to guide human action towards enlightenment and emancipation – making agents aware of and/or aiding them in their struggles against oppressive social conditions.[6]

[3] Anderson, Elizabeth. "Knowledge, Human Interests, and Feminist Epistemology". As Anderson puts it, theoretical inquiry does not simply seek truths, but an "organized body of truths that can lay claim to significance" by reference to the questions being posed (p. 37).
[4] Haslanger, Sally. "Practice Theory as a Tool for Critical Social Theory." *Analyse & Kritik* 45, no. 1 (2023): 157-176, p. 166.
[5] Jaeggi, Rahel. "Rethinking ideology." *New waves in political philosophy* (2009): 63-86, p. 65.
[6] Geuss, Raymond. *The idea of a critical theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 58-59.

Critical theory, however, does not merely call for action towards emancipation – it itself aims to have an emancipatory effect on its audience by raising their consciousness about various aspects of the social world. It seeks to make agents aware of hidden coercion, "thereby freeing them from that coercion and putting them in a position to determine where their true interest lie".[7] Unlike liberals, conservatives, or democrats, critical theorists assert that their target audience *ought to* adopt the critical worldview in order to free themselves from a state of partly self-imposed coercion.[8] The knowledge that we gain from critical theories is therefore supposed to transform our theoretical understanding of the world as well as our practical orientation in it.

This emancipatory effect is the result of exposing and critiquing *ideology*, by which I mean the false or otherwise distorted beliefs and practical orientations that agents have in particular practices. As I explain in detail below, having an ideological consciousness is inextricably tied with being unfree in the critical framework. Agents contribute to reproducing an oppressive social reality because they do not recognize their own role in that process of reproduction. The emancipatory knowledge that critical theories provide therefore includes an awareness of the "plasticity of social norms," meaning the extent to which our social practices and institutions are subject to our collective control, reinterpretation, and revision.[9] It also entails the recognition that many aspects of our social practices and normative order correspond to the interests of dominant groups. Far from being universal or "unchangeably given", as especially those who benefit from them tend to believe, our social arrangements are historical artifacts.[10]

The present chapter articulates a critical account of how individuals "come into being as social subjects" in the school, how the contemporary educational system forms their worldviews, practical orientations, and desires so as to function in and accept an unjust, oppressive social system.[11] It also seeks to uncover the root of injustices and dysfunctions that participants in a social

[7] Geuss, p. 55.
[8] Ibid, p. 58.
[9] Honneth, Axel. "Is there an emancipatory interest? An attempt to answer critical theory's most fundamental question." *European Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (2017): 908-920, p. 917.
[10] Honneth, p. 916.
[11] Geuss, p. 70.

setting might already recognize, but cannot fully articulate or explain. Though various critical theorists disagree about how to understand the connection between people's lived experience of injustice and false consciousness, all accept ideology critique as essential to effective theorizing about the social world.[12]

Implicit in critical theorists' goals of enlightening and ultimately emancipating a particular group or community is a series of normative commitments. Most theorists in the critical tradition recognize that they are motivated and guided in their inquiry by commitments to various historically specific conceptions of human freedom, flourishing, well-being, etc.[13] Even if the motivation is articulated negatively, e.g. as alleviating human suffering or resisting injustice, it is nevertheless a normative commitment. The project of emancipation from oppression or unfreedom, for example, is only coherent if one believes in the possibility of a free (or at least less unfree) existence, even if one's conception of freedom or justice is not fully articulated.

So where do critical theories' normative commitments come from? There are a few sources. First, like the liberal, conservative, and democratic theories, critical accounts rely on their social ontology as a yardstick for their evaluations. One way they begin their critique of existing social arrangements is by noting that they are poorly calibrated to the kinds of beings humans are. As I explain in the following section, we have the collective power to make and remake our social order and an essential interest in being able to exercise this power. However, unlike the dominant approaches, a central social ontological assumption of critical theories is that the sorts of beings we are changes historically through our collective activity. As a result, critical theorists observe our actual social practices and institutions in order to both articulate a conception of human beings and identify possibilities for change.

[12] Geuss, drawing on Habermas, argues there is an inherent connection between false consciousness and unfree existence – agents "can't be freed from their coercive social institutions as long as they retain the ideological world-picture which legitimizes them, nor can they get ride of their ideological world-picture as long as their basic coercive social institutions render it immune to free discussion and criticism" (60). Sally Haslanger and Robin Celikates have argued for an understanding of critical theory that does not rely as heavily on claims about agents' false consciousness, and hence cannot rely primarily on debunking or disproving false beliefs.

[13] Some critical theorists claim that they propose purely 'epistemic', non-normative critiques. Arguing against this approach is beyond the scope of this chapter, which embraces the 'normative' orientation in critical theory.

In addition to using social ontology as a source of normativity, critical theorists formulate goals and commitments from the internal standpoint of participants in various social practices and movements. There are two general ways of doing this. First, a Hegelian style of immanent critique, present in the works of Axel Honneth and Rahel Jaeggi, aims to reveal contradictions and tensions within the social and political order. In this understanding, critique generates normative standards *negatively* – what is right emerges as the theorist identifies and explains the deficiencies and pathologies of a society.[14] This style is called *immanent*, as opposed to external or internal, because "only those principles or ideals that have already in some way gelled in a given society count as legitimate resources for social criticism."[15] The critical theorist is not importing transcendental or completely alien normative commitments into their analysis (external critique), but they are also not limited to merely echoing existing social perspectives (internal critique).

Other critical theorists, such as Sally Haslanger, conceptualize the role of the critical theorist as a participant in a social practice or movement with *their own* values and commitments. Unlike immanent critique, this approach does not claim to be primarily engaged in the clarification and elucidation of contradictions in our views and practices. Like everyone else, theorists "engage in critique as agents *within* a set of unjust social practices".[16] At the same time, their role is distinct. While participants in unjust practices express criticism through "gut refusals" to comply with the existing order and "desiring negations" – wishing that things were different, their critical perspectives are often limited, disparate, and even contradictory.[17] They might conflate personal misfortune with injustice or misattribute social and political wrongs to personal misgivings. The critical theorist has a set of tools that can aid ordinary participants in social practices to identify the systemic and structural sources of their discontentment and suffering. However, they do not necessarily limit their normative perspectives to ones inherent in the existing arrangements.

[14] Jaeggi 2009, p. 73.
[15] Honneth, Axel. "Reconstructive Social Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso: On the Idea of "Critique" in the Frankfurt School." In *Pathologies of Reason*. Columbia University Press, 2009, p. 47. See also Stahl, Titus. *Immanent critique*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2021.
[16] Haslanger, Sally. "Political epistemology and social critique." *Oxford studies in political philosophy* 7 (2021): 23-65, p. 24.
[17] Haslanger 2021. Haslanger is drawing here on Jane Mansbridge's idea of an 'oppositional consciousness' starting with a "gut refusal to be subordinated" and Iris Marion Young's notion of 'desiring negation' (p. 46).

Through critique, they can "develop an alternative description and explanation that reveals morally relevant aspects" of which participants were previously unaware.[18]

I draw on both kinds of critique in this chapter. I articulate a critical analysis of formal systems of education, focusing on primary and secondary schooling, informed by a more general critical theory of the social system. The analysis of ideology relies on a more immanent style of critique to show the contribution of schools to social reproduction. I put these theoretical assumptions in conversation with oppositional perspectives from students, teachers, and policymakers who attempt to resist the socialization process in school.

B. The Social Ontology of Critical Theories of Education

A central ontological assumption of critical theories is that human beings are shaped by the structures and systems they inhabit. This ontology sees us as social, historical, and political beings whose capacities and interests are the products of living under particular institutional arrangements. To be sure, like all living creatures, human beings have certain ineliminable needs and limitations. But the very moment we start acting on the world in order to fulfill our needs, our abilities and powers develop, and in turn give rise to new needs. Critical theorists regard this dialectical process as changing the historical and cultural expressions of human nature.[19]

The social ontology underlying critical theory is therefore best understood as split into two levels. On the first level, critical theorists provide a dynamic, historical picture of human beings' specific needs and capacities. As we organize and conduct our activity in the world at a specific time and place, so we are. A person living in the twenty-first century United States needs access to the Internet just as the eighteenth-century British worker needed a linen shirt, according to Adam

[18] Ibid, p. 56.
[19] Erich Fromm interprets Marx as proposing a distinction between 'general human nature' and the specific expression of human nature in particular cultures at particular moments in history (Fromm, Erich. *Marx's concept of man*. Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.: New York, 1961).

Smith. Whenever we refer to 'human nature' in this first-order sense, this is at the same time a *second nature* – shaped by our social practices and relations.[20]

In saying this, critical theorists are at the same time making a second-level claim about human nature or our 'meta-essence,' namely that we are the kinds of beings whose nature is a dynamic product of our collective activity in the world. We make ourselves into beings with different needs and different capacities to fulfill needs through our cultural, social, and economic arrangements. What counts as a fulfilling or flourishing human life, in which our capacities develop, and we are able to meet our needs, is historically variable but to a significant extent *under our collective control.*

This understanding of human nature gives critical theorists a substantive normative standard for evaluating the social world. A society in which people are either unaware of their world-making and self-fashioning capacities or in which only a small portion of people are in fact free to exercise these capacities is by definition unfree. To put it differently, as beings who collectively make their normative orders, we have an essential emancipatory interest in the freedom to exercise such normative powers. Under present circumstances, according to most critical theorists' diagnoses, this requires overcoming all kinds of epistemic blockages and material barriers.[21] This second-order fact about human beings is not historically specific or contingent. In other words, the meta-essence is fixed. The two-level structure makes the critical theoretical conception of the human "as much historical as ontological".[22]

The social ontology of critical theories thus differs from the liberal and democratic ones in recognizing human nature as much more thoroughly a product of social and historical activity. As I explained in the previous chapter, liberal social theory conceives of rational individual agents as prior to society and political community, which they enter in pursuit of their own advantage. Liberal theorists recognize that individuals can be influenced and shaped to a certain extent by

[20] Hegel, G. W. F. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (trans. Nisbet), Cambridge University Press, 1991. §151.
[21] Honneth, "Is there an emancipatory interest?" (2017).
[22] Marcuse, Herbert. *Reason and revolution*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1968, p. 149.

their cultural and social milieu. However, they conceive of the person as having an identity and capacities for action that are in large part pre-social. This is similarly the case with the democratic tradition that embraces liberal individualism but centers rational deliberation and self-governance as our main normative powers. These conceptions of freedom, unlike the critical ones, are usually restricted to the political realm. They do not cover the economic relations and cultural practices that are also part of our forms of life.

Surprisingly, then, critical social ontology shares more in common with the conservative picture of human nature than the other dominant traditions. Conservatives, like critical theorists, portray human beings as social animals, fundamentally dependent on others and on a shared culture for their flourishing. They also recognize that our cultures provide us with frames of action and understanding that constitute our rational agency within social practices. However, from a critical perspective, conservatives systematically underplay the other half of that dialectical relation, namely human beings' collective ability to change culture and their social practices throughout history. Individual agency is thoroughly a product of our culture, but we are also the collective authors of our cultures.[23]

Given their dynamic understanding of human nature as an evolving product of human history, critical theories are interested in the formation of subjects in particular social, cultural, and historical circumstances. To put it differently, as a result of this view of the phylogeny of human nature, ontogeny becomes particularly important. For liberal, conservative, and democratic theories, whose social ontologies are not historically evolving, the function of education amounts to *making people into what they essentially are* – be it autonomous moral agents for the liberal, members of a particular cultural community for the conservative, or rational deliberative agents for the democrat. Critical theories' task of articulating the role of schools is more difficult. Not only is human nature changing, but the social processes of subject formation and our consciousness of

[23] Another way to express this point is to say that conservatives only capture one half of the Doppelsatz ("what is actual is rational"), but not the other ("what is rational is actual"). (Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Fredrich. *Hegel: Elements of the philosophy of right*. Cambridge University Press, 1991, *Preface*.)

these processes themselves change historically. Critical theories must therefore explain the formation of human subjects under present circumstances and at the same time evaluate the extent to which we possess and are able to self-consciously exercise our collective world-making powers. Designing a system of education amounts to *shaping the sorts of people we want to be*.

II. The Evaluative Dimensions of Critical Theories of Education: Schools' Role in Social Reproduction

Based on this methodology and ontology, the main normative standard in the critical evaluation of schools is freedom understood as conscious collective control over our social arrangements, and consequently over human nature. We are unfree in the present social order insofar as we are shaped or formed as certain kinds of social subjects "behind our backs", in ways that we do not control or understand, and we would not consciously endorse if we did. Critical theory understands schools as playing a crucial role in the reproduction of this order, meaning the ensured continued existence – either maintenance or expansion – of society, especially concerning its forces and relations of production.[24]

To be sure, institutions and practices other than the school, like the family, religious organizations, and cultural associations contribute to social reproduction. Schools, however, play a unique role under capitalism because they are the common site where all future participants in production acquire a toolkit of requisite knowledge and abilities. Educational practices always have a function in social reproduction, but they assume a unique form in capitalism. In feudalism and prior modes of production, most workers acquired their skills on the job, i.e. through the labor

[24] Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays* (transl. Ben Brewster). Monthly Review Press, 1971. They also ensure social reproduction in a distinct sense emphasized by the socialist feminist tradition, namely the organization of labor for the maintenance of life – from care to food preparation and cleaning (Arruzza, Cinzia. "Remarks on Gender". *Vienpoint Magazine* (2014), p. 17). In this chapter I will mostly be referring to the broader sense of social reproduction, but the role of the school in subjectivation is inextricably connected to the feminist emphasis of production of human beings. See also Durkheim, Émile. *Education and Sociology* (transl. Sherwood D. Fox). The Free Press, 1956, p. 71. This is a fundamental insight in the sociological study of education. Durkheim defines education systems as "the means by which society prepares, within the children, the essential conditions of its existence".

process itself. By contrast, our increasingly complex training must at least in large part take place outside of and prior to the process of production, in formal educational institutions.[25]

The interaction between the school and the family is especially relevant to social reproduction. In addition to their obvious role in early socialization and learning, as ample social science research shows, families shape the formal educational trajectories of children – from what schools they attend, the content they learn, and the level they attain to the kinds of roles they go on to perform. Sociological studies have captured in detail the childrearing differences between middle-class from working-class and poor families, which create reliable patterns of educational advantage and disadvantage.[26] Schools' role in social reproduction should therefore be understood as part of a complex *family-school nexus*.

But the role of formal educational systems is nevertheless worth isolating and analyzing on its own. Critical theory can show us schools' distinctive contribution to forming social subjects who are at the same time unfree and unaware of their lack of freedom. In the following two subsections, I use the resources of critical theory to argue that this subject formation happens in two main ways in the educational system. First, schools inculcate general, deeply ingrained attitudes and dispositions that ensure adherence to a dominant social order and prevent the realization of freedom. Second, the school system cultivates differentiated attitudes and dispositions that embed individuals into existing positions in the same unjust social order based on their pre-existing class positions, as well as along lines of race, gender, and ability.

[25] Althusser, p. 132. For a detailed and complex macro-sociological analysis of the emergence of state educational systems within capitalism and the dynamics of educational change in these systems (focusing on the comparative study of England, France, Denmark, and Russia), see Archer, Margaret Scotford. *Social origins of educational systems*. Routledge, 2013.

[26] For example, as Annette Lareau shows, middle-class parents tend to emphasize the "concerted cultivation" of their children's abilities through structured activities, while working-class and poor parents focus on providing care and fostering the "accomplishment of natural growth" without nearly as much conscious direction or control (Lareau, Annette. *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Univ of California Press, 2011, p. 31-32.) The two approaches impact all aspects of children's educational experiences, from their proficiency in language use to the organization of their daily lives, the relationship between the family and the school, and long-term educational outcomes. Through the transmission of differential educational advantages to children, including familiarity with abstract concepts, vocabulary size, and levels of comfort in relation to authority figures, they function to reproduce class inter-generationally (Ibid, p. 5-6).

A. General Interpellation – Individual Agency and Human Capital

Schools help reproduce an unjust social order. They form subjects with specific worldviews and conceptions of the good that falsely appear as self-generated and freely chosen. The resulting agents are unaware of the social shaping process that engulfs them and consequently prevented from taking collective control of it. The educational system achieves this by masking its commitment to the dominant order, portraying itself as a neutral environment "purged" of value that opens up for students "the path to freedom, morality and responsibility".[27] In this section I develop a critical theory-inspired evaluation of the formation of students' subjectivity. I argue that contemporary schools inculcate a series of individualistic orientations towards the good life, the acceptance of dominant values and norms under the guise of autonomous choice, and a pathological orientation towards productive activity.

Given their claim that we live in societies persistently characterized by class, race, and gender oppression, critical theorists must grapple with an obvious question. Why do individuals just go along with unjust and oppressive social practices? A central tool for answering it is the critical conception of ideology. In the Marxian tradition, 'ideology' is a pejorative term referring to the attitudes, concepts, ideas, dispositions that emanate from and function to justify material relationships of domination.[28] Ideology is a "cultural technē gone *wrong*".[29] It is a repository of meanings, scripts, schemas, heuristics, and principles that organize us in unjust ways or distort our understanding of what is valuable.[30] By obscuring the nature of oppressive social relations so as to make them appear just, rational, or immutable, ideology ensures the continued participation of agents in social practices.[31]

[27] Althusser, p. 156-157.
[28] Marx, Karl. *The German Ideology*, Collected Works Vol. 5, *Marx & Engels Collected Works*.
[29] Haslanger, Sally. "I—Culture and critique." In *Aristotelian society supplementary volume*, vol. 91, no. 1, pp. 149-173. Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 155-157, 159.
[30] Ibid, p. 155-157.
[31] We can understand practices as forms of social coordination in which a particular cultural schema organizes our management – production, distribution, etc. – of certain resources. See: Haslanger 2017, p. 156-157. See also Haslanger, Sally. "Cognition as a social skill." *Australasian Philosophical Review* 3, no. 1 (2019): 5-25, p. 6-8.

The process by which agents come to embody and enact ideology is "interpellation", another way of saying the formation of social subjects or subjectivization.[32] Rather than being coerced to perform their roles, individuals internalize expectations and hold themselves up to standards they recognize as applying to them. My acting as a social subject in various practices relies on others' as well as my recognition that I, too, am a person, a woman, a sister, a student, etc., rather than external coercion to perform these subjectivities. Such processes of interpellation by which subjects come to "work all by themselves", rather than being forced to do so, take place in what Althusser calls 'Ideological State Apparatuses' (in contrast with 'Repressive State Apparatuses'), including schools, families, churches, civil societies, cultural and political associations.[33]

The purpose of interpellation is to make possible the participation of subjects in "materially engaged practices" – social practices constituted by material objects, including human bodies and resources made meaningful by a cultural schema.[34] Our understanding and approach to everything from riding a bike in city traffic to waiting in line at the store, is the result of constant processes of interpellation. Fluency in social practices is not reducible to propositional knowledge of rules, but also involves bodily habits that might come to feel natural and even spontaneously developed. I never consciously think about the fact that I should sit down and face the speaker when attending a talk or lecture, but as my pre-school teacher will confirm, this is an acquired habit. My interpellation as a social subject involves a mastery of complex repertoires of movements and gestures within a socially shaped material environment that I have learned to navigate and interpret.

[32] Althusser, p. 170, 173. Due to their social ontology, critical theories recognize interpellation, or the formation of subjectivity, as a complex and thoroughly social process. Whatever interests and motivations the human being as an animal has, they are always socially and culturally shaped. Even my innermost thought and private reflection is social activity, given that language is a social product (Marx, Karl. *1844 Manuscripts*, Collected Works Volume 3, p. 297). Such interpellation is necessary and inevitable under any social arrangements, but what makes the process ideological is its embeddedness in an oppressive social system. In other words, the target of critique is not the social formation of subjectivity *per se*, but rather how our current processes organize us in unjust ways.
[33] Ibid, p. 181, p. 144-147.
[34] Haslanger, Sally. *Ideology in practice: what does ideology do?*. Marquette University Press, 2021, p. 34-35.

Formal educational settings prepare individuals to have a fairly particular set of expectations for how their lives should go. They instill in us a sense of individual agency that is exaggerated in some respects and restricted in others. In order to participate in a highly unequal and unjust system of production, individuals are given the sense that they are in a meaningful way in control of their own trajectory. If they apply themselves in school and develop the requisite abilities, they can and will achieve the ends they set for themselves. At the same time, students internalize the expectation that within their productive activity they will exercise little to no agency. Much like their schooling, work will involve ends that are externally imposed and largely predetermined ways of achieving them.

A fundamental element of the individualist practical orientation that schools inculcate is the understanding of ends as fundamentally individual and arbitrary. In this picture, all individuals have access to and are capable of knowing the same world of objective facts through the use of their reason, but what differentiates them is that they "desire different things even when they have the same understanding of the world".[35] Within the limits of right and wrong, the ultimate measure of the good for each individual is their pursuit of their own desires and ends.[36] This claim has been formulated in terms of the irreducible pluralism of values and is at the core of liberal states' commitment to neutrality (perfect or perfectionist) between conceptions of the good. Students implicitly acquire this orientation in school by being repeatedly encouraged to find their individual goals – 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'.

On this basis, learning is seen as an individual endeavor undertaken for the sake of one's own good. You must acquire skills and knowledge in order to pursue *your* independently formed life plans, rather than in order to contribute to social projects or collective conceptions of the good. The independence of the life plan is conveyed through the fact that evaluation of learning

[35] Unger, Roberto Mangabeira. *Knowledge and politics*. Simon and Schuster, 1976, p. 40.
[36] Ibid, p. 68.

and progress is done on an individual basis. Even though children often work in groups in the classroom, they are graded, and in some contexts also ranked, individually.

Two different types of attitudes are cultivated by this set-up. First, the manufactured scarcity of recognition and rewards in school – from top grading curves to tracking, prizes, and honors – gives students the perception of a scarcity of resources in the world. Learning is thus framed as an instrumentalized competition with real stakes for one's career and life path, rather than a collective cooperative activity of flourishing. Second, this leads to a background suspicion of other individuals as competitors for finite resources. Given the general sense that not everyone can or should excel or 'get an A', other students' self-realization is potentially an obstacle to one's own.

The resulting orientation is ideological for a few reasons. Neither learning nor productive activity are inherently competitive, but only contingently so under our present social order. Resource scarcity as the background for all social activity is likewise not natural, but a historical and social artifact. Resources only seem scarce if individuals are assumed to be utility-maximizing and competitive and if their desires are assumed to be at odds. But the claim that individuals form their values and conceptions of the good on the basis of unsocialized or arbitrary desires or preferences, which are bound to be contradictory, is misleading. Desires and values are just as much a part of social processes of subject formation as any other aspect of individuality.

Individuals form their conceptions of the good based on the existing standards and social hierarchies of value in their particular societies. It is unsurprising, for example, that the occupations and social positions that are the most highly paid are also the most desired by individuals under present conditions. Money is the main measure of value under capitalism, so it is at the core of students' valuation of particular pursuits, projects, and occupations. The lack of popularity of the humanities in comparison to STEM disciplines is one of the most obvious examples of the contemporary valuation of useful knowledge. Indeed, universities often market themselves to

prospective students by showing them information about the average compensation for various majors and programs after graduation.

One problem with the formation of such individual desires and conceptions of the good, according to a number of critical theorists, is precisely that they *can* be met within a highly unjust and oppressive social system. Herbert Marcuse argues, for example, that advanced capitalism produces "one-dimensional man".[37] As individuals lose their powers of criticism and their desire to transcend the existing social order, their 'negative dimension' is flattened, and their existence becomes one with the dominant ideology.[38] Aspirations run as high as the price of the latest phone, car, or pair of shoes. People come to identify with a society that manufactures their needs and then is to a certain extent successful in "delivering the goods" to meet them.[39]

Marcuse identifies the educational system, along with mass media, religious and cultural organizations, as a central institution for the formation of one-dimensional individuals. He refers to the contemporary school, with its focus on professional training and the decline of humanities and critical thought, as an "education in sickness".[40] One of the central functions of such an education is keeping students within the "conceptual and value universe of the established society", rather than allowing them to transcend or radically change it.[41] Marcuse therefore regards the ideal of 'neutrality' in schools as spurious:

> We cannot be "neutral," value-free in this struggle, because there is no neutrality vis-à-vis liberation and repression, quality and exploitation, Eros and Thanatos. Learning and teaching must place themselves in the service of the former against the latter.[42]

It is no accident that this process of interpellation overlaps with the liberal approach to education, which calls for neutrality in training autonomous individuals while failing to recognize the inevitable social shaping of desires and values. The liberal educational model is dominant at

[37] Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*. Routledge, 2013.
[38] Ibid, p. 11-13.
[39] Ibid, p. xliv.
[40] Marcuse, Herbert. "Lecture on education, Brooklyn college, 1968." *Marcuse's challenge to education*, ed. Douglas Kellner (2009): 33-38, p. 36.
[41] Ibid, p. 34.
[42] Ibid, p. 36.

present precisely because it plays a central role in the reproduction of capitalism. Thus, critical theory can offer an external critique of the liberal social ontology. Under the guise of neutrality, liberal theories of education in reality tend to conceptualize individuals as they are shaped by schools within liberal capitalist societies, rather than as they are universally and transhistorically. In the liberal policy program this commitment is explicitly formulated in the rejection of indoctrination, but it takes a myriad of forms in everyday classroom interactions.

In addition to forming subjects whose aspirations and conceptions of the good fit neatly within the boundaries of the establishment, the education system plays an important ideological function in *legitimating* the established order. Schools give students faith that the market competition they are about to enter is not only *natural* – a reflection of individuals seeking to realize their own goals and visions of the good – but also *fair*. Students learn that they are free to forge their own paths by working towards the realization of their independently formed life plans. The meritocratic "rhetoric of rising," according to which each individual can rise as far as their talents and hard work take them, justifies capitalist free markets of careers open to talents as a fair mechanism of allocating rewards.[43] If success is largely a matter of personal responsibility, then failure is either reflective of lack of talent or lack of trying.

Much of the ideological and social reproductive work done by the school is further concealed by its self-portrayal as a mechanism for social mobility. Under a regime of equality of opportunity, academic excellence and virtues are *merits* that will be recognized in a free market of careers open to talents. Thus, it is up to individual pupils, under this "school ideology of social salvation through scholastic merit", to make the best of their abilities through hard work and perseverance.[44] The reality of class reproduction, which I discuss in the second part of my analysis, is concealed by the emphasis on independently generated ends pursued by individual agents with

[43] See, for example, Sandel, Michael J. *The tyranny of merit: What's become of the common good?*. Penguin UK, 2020, Chapter 3: "The Rhetoric of Rising". Sandel cites global opinion surveys according to which most Americans (77%) believe that if they work hard, they can succeed. Similarly, many of his students at Harvard believe that they earned their place in the university.
[44] Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (transl. Richard Nice), Sage publications, 1990, p. 200.

various natural endowments, who receive the same training and same opportunities to succeed. "[T]he educational system" Bourdieu and Passeron write, "tends, by concealing the objective truth of its functioning, to produce the ideological justification of the order it reproduces by its functioning."[45]

I will not rehearse here the many critiques of the inequalities sustained under capitalism and justified by the ideological ethic of meritocracy.[46] I want to point instead to an additional, subtler process of interpellation that relates to individuals' attitudes towards their work. The dualism between reason and desire I discussed above corresponds to the more familiar dichotomy between the public and private realms. The way we relate to these realms is yet another set of practical orientations inculcated by schools under capitalism. While independent life plans and conceptions of the good can influence the choice of which careers or jobs to enter, they are not what governs one's action within the public realm of productive activity. Work is generally understood to be a realm of necessity and external compulsion, rather than freedom. With some exceptions, the private realm of free time and consumption is that of independent, autonomous pursuits, while the realm of productive work is the means to that freedom.

A powerful illustration of how this orientation is formed in the educational system comes from critical theorist Michael Apple's study of a public kindergarten classroom.[47] He observes how quickly children internalize strict rules of interaction with classroom materials based on the significance of 'work'. After being repeatedly punished or reprimanded by the teacher for handling things such as crayons or dolls improperly, they implicitly developed the following system "for defining and organizing their social reality in the classroom":

> The children divided the materials into two categories: things to work with and things to play with. No child organized any material in violation of what seemed to be their guiding principle. Those materials that the children used at the direction of the teacher were work

[45] Ibid, p. 206.
[46] In addition to Sandel (202), see also McNamee, Stephen J., and Miller, Robert K. *The Meritocracy Myth*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004; Markovits, Daniel. *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite*. 2019; Yu, Kai. *The Implementation of Inclusive Education in Beijing: Exorcizing the Haunting Specter of Meritocracy*, 2014.
[47] Apple, Michael. *Ideology and curriculum*. Routledge, 2004, p. 13. Apple revealingly describes the ideological meanings, concepts, and dispositions that are tacitly taught to and internalized by students over their years of schooling as a "hidden curriculum". In this view, education has a "deep structure" behind the "official curriculum" and both levels contribute in different ways to interpellation.

> materials. These included books, paper, paste, crayons, glue, and other materials traditionally associated with school tasks. No child chose to use these materials during "play" time, early in the school year. The materials which the children chose during free time were labeled play materials or toys. These included, among other things, games, small manipulatives, the play house, dolls, and the wagon.[48]

The two categories the children internalized were 'work' – compulsory activity in accordance with a uniform procedure in which everyone uses the same given materials to make the same kind of end-products – and 'play' – self-guided, voluntarily undertaken activity in one's 'free-time' from work.[49] To use Haslanger's terminology, the children became fluent in the social practice of the classroom by appropriating a cultural technē, the concepts and associated meanings and norms of work and play, that organized them around the material resources of the classroom. These concepts were defined by the presence or absence of external direction. One works by doing what one is told and plays when free from such direction.

The example showcases a practical orientation essential for productive activity within capitalism. Most workers do not expect to have much control over their labor – they are not free when they are working. This is also generally true of capital owners, whose activity is dictated by the imperative to generate profits. Students leave school equipped and expecting to perform work under external control and authority and circumscribed to particular means for achieving pre-determined ends, rather than as an expression of their self-determination and creativity. The critical evaluation here aligns with and recognizes many students' experience of schoolwork as constrained drudgery that they cannot wait to finish to pursue their interests and passions.

Extrapolating from such instances of interpellation, critical theorists have examined the passive orientation that educational systems cultivate, which translates into non-agential roles in production. In Paulo Freire's terms, schools tend to objectify the student by placing her in the position of a passive 'recipient' or 'depository' of a content 'narrated' by a teacher.[50] Much like the act of depositing money in a bank, this 'narrative encounter' is unidirectional and static. The

[48] Apple 2004, p. 55.
[49] Ibid, p. 54-58.
[50] Freire, Paulo. "Pedagogy of the oppressed (revised)." *Continuum,* 2005, p. 71.

content a teacher transmits is fixed, not subject to contestation or change by students. Teacher and student do not approach learning about the world as "critical co-investigators". Instead, the former positions themselves as the owner of already formed truths and verdicts.[51] This 'banking' approach to education, as Freire puts it, encourages seeing reality as static and given, rather than of our own making, dynamic, and changeable. Thus, another crucial aspect of interpellation in the school is the passive attitude towards social and political arrangements – instead of recognizing themselves as subjects of history, people see themselves as confronted with a given reality impervious to change.

B. Differential Interpellation – Reproducing Class Society

In addition to general interpellation processes, schools form students *differentially*. They reproduce the hierarchical structure and complex division of labor of our economic and social order by preparing different sorts of students for different roles. The school system's claim to be governed by equal concern for individuals and equal opportunity further conceals its role in the reproduction of structures of oppression and exploitation. But the critical evaluation of the educational system differs from the liberal or democratic one in a crucial respect. The point is not simply that schools have not attained fair equality of opportunity, but that schools evaluate and rank students for the purpose of selection and differentiation to begin with. In other words, the diagnosis is not merely that the educational competition is unfair, but that *education should not be structured as a competition at all*. Contemporary schools' function of sorting and differentially affording opportunities to students in order to reproduce the existing social order is opposed to the critical educational goal of collective freedom.

One of the primary ways a system of education differentially shapes agents is through the time they are "ejected". As Althusser notes, students destined for higher earning roles tend to leave

[51] Freire, p. 81.

the educational system later. Each student is thereby "provided with the ideology that suits its role" as a low- or high-skilled worker, manager, or owner.[52] While all workers must be dependable in following orders and diligence in carrying them out, only workers in the higher echelons of authority, who have comparatively more decision-making power and discretion, must also internalize the values of the organization. Future managers must learn to "handle" and "order" the workers correctly, to "speak proper" and "manipulate the ruling ideology" in order to maintain the existing order.[53] To be certain, it is not simply *when* a student leaves the educational system that determines what knowledge, dispositions, and attitudes they have developed, but also various mechanisms of selection and differentiation within the classroom.

This is a process I recognize from my own education, especially my time as a student in the Romanian public education system. Like many former communist countries, Romania still uses a hierarchical cadre system in which students are given supervisory roles in enforcing discipline. Most of these positions are formally open to all students to run for in democratic student elections, but there is a widely understood expectation that the students with highest academic performance and best disciplinary records will serve in these roles. I was one of these students. As 'class president,' in my primary and middle school years I was tasked with checking other students' homework before every class. I had to mark in a notebook whether their work was satisfactory or unsatisfactory, complete or incomplete, according to my judgment. I was also told to report on disruptions of classroom and school discipline – from talking during class to foul language or physical violence – by writing down the names of the violators and brief descriptions of the incidents. I was helped by an 'assistant president' and 'secretary' who had auxiliary administrative functions and reported to me before I reported to the teacher. As a critical theory of education would predict, most former cadres in Romanian schools go on to perform managerial or high-skilled professional work.

[52] Althusser, p. 155.
[53] Althusser, p. 132-133.

The cadre system is an extreme and rather explicit form of the kind of reproduction that takes place more subtly in other systems of education. Different traits and dispositions are rewarded in schools at different levels of education, with middle and high schools emphasizing the traits of subordination to authority, and colleges and universities encouraging the internalization of norms.[54] Moreover, much social science research shows that differences between wealthier and poorer schools, private and public schools, and schools that are predominantly White and Black play a major role in the differential formation of students as subjects who will occupy different economic and political positions. Even within the same school, class, race, gender, and ability are reproduced in the absence of explicit hierarchies or categorizations.

Critical theories of education take issue with the school functioning as a mechanism of differentiation and selection. The competition among students for high marks and recognition in the school on the basis of scholastic achievement prepares them to accept the competition and stratification of their later economic and social activity. Such interpellation is inimical to the aim of cultivating collective freedom and the flourishing of all human beings. Contemporary schools thus cannot achieve the central goal of education, from the critical perspective, as long as they focus primarily on selecting and sorting students for the purpose of occupying already existing positions in the division of labor.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the class-based *habitus* of individual agents, meaning the set of their deeply internalized, durable dispositions and attitudes towards themselves and the world, provides a helpful way of explaining the differentiated process of interpellation.[55] Habitus structures the way we navigate social practices by constituting our "sense of what is comfortable and what is natural".[56] Blue-collar service workers have a different habitus from professionals such as lawyers or doctors. The social position of agents within a social and economic system gives rise to particular perceptions of the world and dispositions, which in turn shape agents' aspirations and

[54] Bowles and Gintis, p. 96, 132.
[55] Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge university press, 1977, p. 77.
[56] Lareau, p. 361.

actions. This is a process of 'looping'; objective conditions that require social coordination give rise to a certain habitus, and agents with a certain habitus in turn reproduce those conditions.[57]

This is not to say that early socialization entirely determines one's social position, but that it gives the agents a particular understanding of what counts as a reasonable or unreasonable expectation for one's life. Our conditions of existence impose "different definitions of the impossible, the possible, and the probable" and "cause one group to experience as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations which another group finds unthinkable or scandalous, and vice versa."[58] The school-family nexus is the crucial locus for the formation of early habitus. A child who grows up in a working-class family in which nobody even attended college will develop a different understanding of their place in the world and a different horizon of expectation than one whose parents are highly educated professionals. Parents' own demands and expectations for their children's education – from the schools they choose to their participation in their children's education – are a crucial shaping factor. The class habitus of parents influences their perception of what their children should learn in order to become successful subjects in their social and cultural milieu.

Habitus thus gives us a way of understanding class in a more expansive way than one's position within economic production. Certain deep, durable cultural dispositions and attitudes are more highly valued than others and can be converted into economic and social advantages. One's 'cultural capital', according to Bourdieu, includes cultural competencies from one's level of language mastery and literacy to the cultivation of tastes, preferences, and aesthetic sensibilities.[59] To have a *cultural* need is to have a *cultivated* need – one develops the need to look at modern art or attend musicals by frequenting such galleries and theatres.[60] Understanding the habitus that children acquire early on in the family and local communities as a potential form of cultural capital

[57] Haslanger 2019, p. 7.
[58] Ibid, p. 78.
[59] Bourdieu, Pierre. "The forms of capital" in *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, 1986.
[60] Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (transl. Richard Nice), Sage publications, 1990, p. 39.

is key to explaining the unequal educational achievements of students along the lines of class. Schools reproduce the dominant culture – including what is deemed to be legitimate knowledge, cultural competencies, 'proper' tastes and preferences – by cultivating a habitus conforming to this dominant culture in students.[61]

How easy it is for students to take up the dominant habitus of the school depends on their previous habituation in their family and local communities. The cultural capital students bring into the school classroom, including the "pedagogical ethos" of their group or class – for example their levels of docility, deference, and respect towards pedagogical authorities – determines the success of the process of inculcation.[62] Thus, the primary habitus, which children enter the educational system having acquired in their families and communities, forms the basis for the subsequent formation of all others. The difficulty of the process and its rate of success thus depends on the *distance* between the primary habitus and the dominant one transmitted in school.[63] While 'conversions' can happen, schools tend to maintain and reinforce the habitus already acquired while giving students from dominated classes a sense of inferiority and devaluation of their own knowledge and dispositions relative to the legitimate knowledge.[64]

Consider the relation between linguistic capital and advancement through the educational system. By 'linguistic capital', I mean the vocabulary, range and complexity of concepts, and mastery of spoken and written language codes and patterns that give individuals a higher or lower capacity to "decipher and manipulate complex structures, whether logic or aesthetic".[65] Entering school with a more complex vocabulary and middle- or upper-class linguistic interaction style will allow you to engage with academic subject matter more readily. Class differences in childrearing crucially involve differences in linguistic capital.[66]

[61] Bourdieu and Passeron, p. 32-33.
[62] Ibid, p. 35-36.
[63] Ibid, p. 72.
[64] Ibid, p. 42.
[65] Bourdieu and Passeron, p. 73.
[66] Lareau, p. 146.

Thus, by the time children even enter the formal school system, inequalities between their linguistic capital are often dramatic.[67] This in turn determines their ability to internalize the habitus of the school, which linguistically amounts to "scholarly mastery of scholarly language".[68] A child who already reads and writes beyond their grade level obviously has a major advantage in acquiring further skills and knowledge over one who does not yet have either of those competencies. Hence, progressive teaching techniques that emphasize learner autonomy, self-expression, and the rejection of traditional skills training under the control of the teacher only advantage children who "are already participants in the culture of power and who have already internalized its codes".[69] The same techniques for teaching students to read and write, for example, further widen the skills and competencies gap between students with the linguistic capital of middle and upper classes and those from lower class backgrounds.[70]

The reproduction of class can be seen in the rate of elimination of particular classes from the educational system at different levels and in different disciplines, as well as the successful gradual inculcation of the dominant habitus in higher education. As one advances from secondary to post-secondary levels of education, the more selection based on tests and examinations is involved, one finds that the "survivors" from lower classes have acquired the dominant linguistic and cultural capital, a particular "style and a relation to language and culture that serves the classes or groups from whom it derives authority".[71]

But a crucial part of the reproductive work takes place before any examinations are involved. Indeed, "most of those excluded from studying at the various levels of education eliminate themselves before being examined".[72] Faced with a lower capacity to receive the knowledge transmitted in school and to act in the sanctioned ways in terms of tastes and

[67] For example, Annette Lareau points out that conversations in middle-class families, as opposed to working-class and poor ones, tend to involve extended discussions and debates, longer sentences, richer vocabularies that comprise abstract concepts, and more complex uses of language such as word play. (Lareau, p. 29).
[68] Bourdieu and Passeron, p. 72.
[69] Delpit, Lisa. *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. The New Press, 2006, p. 28.
[70] Ibid, p. 13-15.
[71] Bourdieu and Passeron, p. 112.
[72] Ibid, p. 153.

dispositions, lower-class students are effectively excluded from certain forms of education and from disciplines and fields centered on the dominant linguistic and cultural capital.

This focus on class reproduction does not imply that differential interpellation of students is solely class-based. Many studies of the U.S. education system catalogue the differences in pedagogies, values and norms between low-income, predominantly Black public schools and wealthy, majority White ones. While low-income schools tend to emphasize obedience and discipline imposed by teachers in an authoritarian fashion, wealthy ones encourage self-discipline, self-reliance, and self-motivation is the learning process.[73] These patterns often end up being perpetrated by progressive and alternative schools that self-consciously pursue a mission motivated by social justice and instilling critical reflectiveness.[74] But the way agency is limited in each of these contexts differs. In high- income schools, "not injunctions and prohibitions, but norms and standards of good conduct and character" are inculcated.[75] Moreover, these are imposed by softer means – "not by demanding that students obey, so much as by inducing them to accept and to conform willingly".[76]

These pedagogical approaches are not simply the result of idiosyncratic differences between individual teachers or schools.[77] Teachers in majority Black, low-income public schools make strategic choices in their pedagogies precisely because they recognize their students' embeddedness in contexts with high poverty, elevated rates of crime, including violent crime, as well as high rates of arrest and incarceration. They understand these as imperfect but "practicable means to helping students avoid dangers that threaten their well-being, and improving their chances for social and economic advancement".[78] This often leads them to embrace ideological narratives of individual responsibility and merit, focusing on students' control of choosing a life

[73] Hayward, Clarissa Rile. *De-facing power*. Cambridge University Press, 2000. See, for example, p. 64, 123, 140.
[74] See, for example, Shange, Savannah. *Progressive dystopia: Abolition, antiblackness, and schooling in San Francisco*. Duke University Press, 2019.
[75] Ibid, p. 123.
[76] Ibid, p. 123.
[77] Ibid, p. 64.
[78] Hayward, p. 110.

of 'responsible citizenship' and professional success. Even teachers who are well aware that structural conditions shape students' choices and opportunities often still choose to emphasize personal agency and values because "they stand a chance of influencing these".[79]

Reproduction of racial hierarchies, however, is by no means isolated to schools segregated along the lines of race and class. Integrated school contexts embedded in racially oppressive societies also tend to reproduce the dominant race dynamics. In her paper "Studying While Black", Sally Haslanger presents a number of cases that show how race as a category is constructed in the classroom through "breakdowns of trust and trustworthiness between students and teachers", perpetuating background racial hierarchies and injustices.[80] Haslanger analyzes case studies that illustrate how Black students suffer ego depletion, the loss of effort optimism, and epistemic injustice in the classroom because the educational context imposes and sustains racist stereotypes, social meanings, and prejudices.[81] The assumptions teachers make are unconsciously shaped by the dominant ideology, in spite of their best intentions. This is a type of injustice that is neither distributive nor procedural – students are not explicitly being discriminated against or excluded on the basis of race. Hence, it cannot be readily analyzed or addressed by either liberal or democratic approaches to education.

Finally, race and class ideologies are deeply intertwined in the educational context with the perception of ability and disability. In the US educational context, non-White, poor children are much more often diagnosed with learning and behavioral problems. For example, Black students are about twice more likely than their White peers to be diagnosed with an intellectual disability and this disparity persists even when comparing non-low-income students from both racial groups. Hispanic, Black, and Native students are in general more likely to be identified by the educational system as disabled and once diagnosed, they tend to spend significantly more time in separate

[79] Ibid, p. 104.
[80] Haslanger, Sally. "Studying While Black: Trust, Opportunity, and Disrespect." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 11, no. 1 (2014), p. 109.
[81] Ibid, p. 122-130.

special education classrooms than their White peers with the same disabilities.[82] While not denying that placement in special education classrooms can be beneficial for some students, critical theorists have shown that inclusion in a special education category itself produces looping effects – "the labels "call forth forms of "treatment" which tend to confirm the person in the institutionally applied category".[83] This phenomenon is best explained not in terms of discriminatory racist or classist attitudes, but as another facet of interpellation. Teachers' conceptions of intelligence, normal capacities, and academic ability are "not free-floating, but the result of the real social and economic conditions which exist outside of school buildings".[84]

III. The Programmatic Dimension of Critical Theories of Education – Strengths and Limitations

So what are the prescriptions that critical theorists of education can make on the basis of their analyses? What does a program for education anchored in ideology and interpellation critiques look like? Given that I am largely sympathetic to the descriptive and evaluative dimensions of critical theories of education, I present what I take to be their main programmatic insights here together with my analysis of their strengths and limitations. Unlike in the case of liberal, conservative, and democratic theories of education, I find the social ontological assumptions of critical theories and their critiques of the status quo convincing. But they are incomplete. As I show, critical theorists have not yet developed a political program capable of solving the problems they themselves diagnose and explain.

To begin with, most critical theorists are not particularly engaged in macro education policy debates. Michael Apple is perhaps the most vocal exception. He has long been a sharp critic of neoliberal reforms to increasingly privatize and standardize education. Apple argues that the

[82] National Center for Learning Disabilities. "Significant Disproportionality in Special Education: Current Trends and Actions for Impact", October 2020.
[83] Apple, p. 139-140.
[84] Ibid, p. 144.

neoliberal single-minded focus on economic efficiency, which has produced an educational system whose only goal is the maximization of human capital, has only exacerbated class and race inequalities.[85] High stakes testing and other standardized measures of accountability that support the educational free market function as mechanisms of reproducing class stratification. The children of professional and managerial classes are more likely to succeed and face less competition under increasingly standardized educational systems.[86] This is both a result of parents with higher social and economic status having more time and resources to actually navigate the competitive educational market and of their children inheriting more of the educationally valued cultural capital.[87]

But resisting privatization, school choice, and standardized testing is only a small start to addressing these issues. Apple recognizes that the solution to the reproduction of unjust class and race hierarchies lie not only within the school, but largely outside it:

> […] we need to take seriously the probability that only by focusing on the exogenous socioeconomic features, not simply the organizational features, of "successful" schools can all schools succeed. Eliminating poverty through greater income parity, establishing effective and much more equal health and housing programs, and positively refusing to continue the hidden and not-so-hidden politics of racial exclusion and degradation that so clearly still characterize daily life in many nations (and in which marketized plans need to be seen as partly a structure to avoid the body and culture of the Other)—only by tackling these issues together can substantive progress be made.

For this reason, some critical education theorists have supported experiments in democratic schooling and living that go beyond the bounds of the school.

One such experiment is a school project in the southern Brazilian town of Porto Alegre, where the left-wing Popular Administration has in the past decades implemented a series of policies to democratize the governance of the city and increase the political participation and voice of its most marginalized citizens. One aspect of these democratization efforts has been the creation of the 'Citizen School', which reimagines both collective political control over education and what

[85] Apple, Michael W. *Educating the "right" way: Markets, standards, God, and inequality*. Taylor & Francis, 2006, p. 33-34, 59.
[86] Ibid, p. 48-49.
[87] Ibid, p. 66.

education for citizenship entails.[88] A participatory citizens' assembly was established to democratically set the educational agenda and school governance was then delegated to a council made of teachers, parents, and students. Among the priorities of the school was the elimination of exclusionary mechanisms such as failing or expelling students. The citizen assembly decided to abolish grades that students could either pass or fail and replace them with three educational cycles centered on student progress and competencies. School curricula was also reorganized around 'thematic complexes', as opposed to discrete subjects, and centered on social and political problems faced by the community.[89]

This type of radical experimentation rooted in critical analysis has unfortunately only been attempted in sporadic local instances.[90] Another example is the 'ungrading' movement to rethink the purpose of evaluation and use alternative assessment methods that prioritize learning and student flourishing rather than selection for the capitalist economy.[91] The effectiveness and impact has been limited both by the lack of broader conditions to sustain this type of radical experimentation and democratic engagement, as well as various disagreements among theorists and activists. Mired in factional debates, many critical voices in policy debates have failed to offer anything beyond the traditional liberal and democratic remedies. In fact, critical analysis is sometimes used to defend existing policies against progressive liberal reformers.[92] The possibility of arguing for such different conclusions from a set of common assumptions underscores the lack of specificity in normative goals and commitments of critical theorists.

Critical approaches to education are committed to the idea of freedom as collective emancipation from oppressive social conditions. Paulo Freire, a founding figure on what has

[88] Gandin, Luis Armando, and Michael W. Apple. "Can education challenge neo-liberalism? The citizen school and the struggle for democracy in Porto Alegre, Brazil." *Arena Journal*, no. 19 (2002).
[89] Ibid.
[90] This is not to say that experimentation of other kinds has not occurred in educational contexts – see, for example, the progressive movement in schools at the beginning of the 20th century inspired by Dewey's philosophy of education, or the creation and development of Waldorf and Montessori schools throughout the last century. But these experimental pedagogies and educational philosophies are not informed by a distinctly critical worldview in the sense described by this chapter.
[91] Kohn, Alfie, and Susan D. Blum. *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*. West Virginia University Press, 2020.
[92] See, for example, a critical defense of charter schools' potential as 'counterpublics': Wilson, Terri S. "Contesting the public school: Reconsidering charter schools as counterpublics." *American Educational Research Journal* 53, no. 4 (2016): 919-952.

become the 'critical pedagogy' movement, argues that education must be a struggle against the dehumanization which oppressive relations have caused in all of us.[93] Because oppressed groups internalize dominant ideologies, they might be unaware of their oppression and of their own capacities and powers. One of the primary tasks of Freire's pedagogy is therefore '*conşcientization*' – the awakening of a critical consciousness of social, political, and economic forms of oppression that leads to emancipatory political action.[94] The mere awareness of oppression, however, is not enough to motivate political action for social transformation.

For this reason, Freire insists on the importance of enhancing the agency and self-efficacy of students. His model of 'problem-posing education', which he develops in opposition to the 'banking' model I mentioned earlier, aims to make students into agents of history. Rather than treating students as the passive recipients of information which is not properly related to their experience and needs, critical education recognizes and nourishes students' powers by construing them as "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher".[95] To engender social transformation, it affirms in students a sense of their own historicity and their involvement in a human process of becoming which is never complete. It also construes the world not as a permanent, immutable set of facts, but as "a problem to be solved, a historical reality susceptible to transformation".[96] Building on the critical social ontology I developed in the first section, Freire's critical pedagogy seeks to instill in students the sense that their own humanity is a historical endeavor that requires collective action, solidarity, and faith in the power of humanity "to make and re-make the world".[97]

Other critical pedagogy theorists like Henry Giroux and bell hooks offer similar prescriptions. Schools are sites of reproduction, but also of "contestation and conflict", in which both teachers and students can exercise their agency to combat the dominant ideology.[98] Giroux

[93] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum, 2005, p. 44.
[94] Ibid, p. 109-110. See also Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000.
[95] Freire, p. 80-81.
[96] Ibid, p. 85.
[97] Ibid, p. 85, 92.
[98] Giroux, Henry. *Pedagogy and the politics of hope: Theory, culture, and schooling: A critical reader*. Routledge, 2018, p. 120.

therefore identifies consciousness-raising and developing new social relations in the classroom as central tasks of a radical pedagogy. He points to the "need for students to interrogate critically their inner histories and experiences", the formation of their needs and interests in the school and outside of it.[99] Teachers can help this process by criticizing the language and discourses in school curricula, pushing back against the reproduction of class and race.[100] Radical educators, Giroux says, must "critically analyze the directives, imperative, and rules that shape the particular configurations of time, space, and curricula" and "join together in a wider social movement dedicated to restructuring the ideological and material conditions of schooling".[101] They must also build community among the students and create an environment of openness, where students learn how to listen and hear each other.[102]

A few of these proposals have been implemented and achieved some success in practice. The curriculum based on 'thematic complexes' at the Citizen School, for example, is based on Freire's idea that education must center on people's "thematic universes" – topics and questions generated by the oppressed.[103] Many other critical pronouncements, however, are not specific enough to guide policymaking or pedagogy. They do not tell us what resources teachers should be drawing upon in order to engage in these counter-ideological struggles, nor how they can do so while meeting the daily demands of their work.

Moreover, it is not clear what many of these pronouncements actually offer beyond liberal or democratic theories' call for more critical thinking and participatory education. Much of the critical program can be understood as calling for increasing autonomy, community control, and democratic deliberation, familiar ideas already commonly expressed in the dominant theories of education. For that reason, liberals and democrats, at least, are happy to accept the diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that bear loose resemblance to some critical theory commitments. These

[99] Ibid, p. 81.
[100] Ibid, p. 135-137.
[101] Giroux, p. 141, 143.
[102] hooks, bell. *Teaching to transgress*. Routledge, 2014, p. 150.
[103] Freire 2005, p. 96.

values can easily be integrated in the dominant frameworks. The radical force of critical theories' diagnoses of our educational systems is consequently dampened by their tepid and piecemeal prescriptions. In a way, the hesitation to make bolder systematic prescriptions results in the absence of a genuine critical *program* for education. At best, what critical theories offer is an array of loosely connected calls to action.

In my view, critical theories' lack of specific programmatic alternatives stems from two sources: ontological and methodological. With respect to the former, critical theory is committed to the ontological idea of historically changing human nature. As we arrange our social world, so we are. Hence, calling for a rearrangement of the world entails a recreation of human nature. This underscores the radicality of the critical project as opposed to the dominant approaches. Our task is nothing short of remaking the world. This is obviously an enormously difficult task. It is hard to even know where to start. For that reason, some critical theorists of education try to avoid it altogether, going so far as to call for school abolition or 'deschooling'.[104] But this strategy renames the problem rather than solving it. Regardless of whether we call it 'school' or not, all societies must include a set of social practices for socializing the young.

On the methodological side, critical theorists are reluctant to supply detailed blueprints because they think these should develop from the ground up. They call on teachers and students to expand their horizons of possibility and collectively refashion our educational and social practices. This is a task for a community, not an individual theorist. Critical theorists' principled refusal to write policies and curricula for the schools of tomorrow is reminiscent of Marx's reluctance to offer 'recipes for the cookshops of the future'.[105] Unfortunately, the relative lack of actionable strategies and blueprints or advice for educators and policymakers puts critical pedagogies at a disadvantage when compared to the liberal, conservative, and democratic ones.

[104] Illich, Ivan. "Deschooling society." (1971).
[105] Marx, Karl. *Capital* (Volume I), Collected Works Vol. 35. Afterword to the Second German Edition, 1873.

Critical pedagogy theorists themselves have expressed these concerns. Apple, considered a founder and leading voice in the critical pedagogy field, has long been critical of the movement's limited effectiveness and reach. He attributes some of neoliberal and conservative reformers' success to their "plain speaking", contrasted with critical pedagogy theorists' "politically confused and confusing" rhetoric, which comes across as "disconnected from the gritty materialities of daily economic, political, and educational/cultural struggles".[106] He is probably right, but the mode of presentation is in many ways secondary to a deeper problem: the dearth of concrete prescriptions. Formulating goals at a high level of abstraction while paying little attention to a political program for here and now is critical pedagogy theorists' way of forgetting that a forest is composed of trees. As Apple puts it, by failing to provide answers to teachers' question of "What do I do on Monday?",

> [the literature] becomes a form of what can best be called "romantic possibilitarian" rhetoric, in which the language of possibility substitutes for a consistent tactical analysis of what the balance of forces actually is and what is necessary to change it.[107]

In the following chapter, I take up the challenge of translating the normative commitments of critical theories into actionable educational policies and pedagogical practices. I do so in part by putting critical theories of education in conversation with liberal, conservative, and democratic ones on topics such as the organization and funding of schools, who should have control over education, and what the content of a mandatory public education ought to be. I also expand on the critical analysis of contemporary educational systems using tools of critical theory that I believe are underexplored in the critical approach to education. Critical theory can and ought to guide public policy through radical reforms even when they fall short of a revolution. It should also give teachers answers to the question "What do I do on Monday?".

[106] Apple 2006, p. 83.
[107] Apple 2006, p. 53.

Chapter III

Social Pathologies of Education: Alienation, Commodification, and Fragmentation

In the previous two chapters I articulated the main limitations of the predominant theories of education. I argued that liberal, conservative, and democratic approaches have flawed social theoretical foundations that are insufficient or even inimical to realizing their own stated goals. Critical theories, on the other hand, start from more promising social theoretical assumptions but do not yield particularly helpful prescriptions. The deficiencies of the two categories of views are inverted images of each other. While liberal, democratic, and conservative theorists do not pay sufficient attention to the social structures and systems in which education is embedded, critical theorists fail to bring their understanding of the place of the school in the social system to bear on everyday educational practices. As a result, critical theories end up treating education just like any other locus of social reproduction and ideological subject formation. They do not attend to the specifics of our practices of schooling and how they differ from subject formation in the family, through media, in churches, etc.

To develop the positive dimension of my view, I go beyond critical social theory while relying on the broad strokes of its ontology of the human. My aim is to supplement this ontology to more precisely characterize the social relations and practices that constitute the domain of education. I argue that we can best understand the educational subsystem by attending to the overlap and co-integration of the family, the state, and economic production. Schools are the mediating institutional domain between the family on one hand and the polity and economic production on the other. I introduce a more complex approach to social theory that also allows us to distinguish between levels of explanation and calibrate our critical diagnoses and prescriptions accordingly. I show that the practice level of analysis, where the interactions between subsystems can best be observed, is the missing link between critical theory's big picture account of schools' role in social reproduction and the everyday interactions of individuals in schools.

At the evaluative level, I articulate three critiques of social pathologies that characterize our contemporary educational practices. *Alienation* and *commodification* are phenomena that have mostly been theorized in relation to capitalist production. I articulate a conception of both phenomena as *social logics* that shape our systems of education. Moreover, I argue that the lenses of alienation and commodification are simply not accessible from liberal, conservative, or democratic social ontologies. They emerge from the particular assumptions of critical theory. At the same time, their import for education has not been fully recognized by critical theorists. To clarify, my claim is not that the education system is fully alienated or commodified, but that these logics structure our current educational practices and will continue to shape their trajectories unless we consciously organize to resist them.

In addition to alienation and commodification, I propose my own critique of the *fragmentation* of the system of education. By 'fragmentation' I mean the pattern of breaking up social practices and institutions into tiers that divide and hierarchically organize participants into distinct social groupings. This is a logic common to a number of social subsystems, from healthcare to housing, but one that manifests in particularly pernicious ways in education. I argue that fragmented school systems undermine social and political solidarity – they sustain hyper-privatized family and support networks and perpetuate the race and class segregation of our communities.[1]

I. Positive Dimension – Co-Integrated Subsystems

Critical theories of education provide a promising conception of human beings' formation as social subjects. Their recognition of the breadth, depth, and nature of our socialization is an improvement over the social ontologies of liberal, conservative, and democratic theories of education. Moreover, their dynamic and historical conceptions of human beings is a more helpful

[1] In previous work I have advanced more local claims about the injustices of school district fragmentation and the fragmentation of charter and traditional public school systems. See Cynamon, Jeremy Kingston, and Sonia Maria Pavel. "The injustices of school district fragmentation." *Power and Education* 14, no. 3 (2022): 247-261; Cynamon, Jeremy Kingston, and Sonia Maria Pavel. "Revoke the Charters: A Critical Reevaluation of Charter Schools." *Polity* 56, no. 1 (2024): 163-186.

starting point than the ahistorical ontologies the other systematic approaches rely on. Instead of centering individual agency and interpersonal relations in classrooms and schools, most critical theorists articulate their approach to education from a 'macro' or system-level perspective. More specifically, the system of education is analyzed in the critical framework primarily in terms of its function in the *reproduction of capitalism*. With the acknowledgment that education also reproduces gender and race, class and social relations of production undeniably take center-stage in this picture. Even though most critical theorists of education are not committed to a base-superstructure model of capitalism and recognize the relative autonomy of other social relations, capitalist production is nevertheless ontologically and explanatorily prior to other social domains and activities.

This theoretical bird's eye view is analytically fruitful and a necessary remedy to the ungrounded, ahistorical nature of liberal, conservative, and democratic social theories. It allows us to see how the interpellation of students in schools is an important venue for the social reproduction of the social system and capitalism in particular. It also enables us to recognize the common function of Althusser's 'Ideological State Apparatuses' – schools, families, religious organizations, media, and popular culture – in forming social subjects and reproducing the system. But the macro perspective is nevertheless limited. The *distinctiveness of education* cannot be fully discerned from such heights of abstraction. Nor can the social relations specific to the educational context be inferred from its reproductive role. The specific contribution of the school system, its interactions and dependence on the other ideological subsystems, as well as the mechanisms of social reproduction that make the school different from the church or the family are blurry at best, invisible at worst.

Some sociologists and anthropologists broadly sympathetic to the critical 'reproduction' theory of education have pointed out these limitations:

> The Marxists […] lacked a theory of concrete social relations in the classroom because it was their assumption that the classroom was a dependent variable in the structure of social

> reproduction; ultimately, they assumed that whatever happened in the classroom was subordinate to the reproductive functions of the school.[2]
>
> Apparently, education unproblematically does the bidding of the capitalist economy by inserting working class agents into unequal futures. […] The actually varied, complex, and creative field of human consciousness, culture, and capacity is reduced to the dry abstraction of structural determination. Capital requires it, therefore schools do it! Humans become dummies, dupes, or zombies.[3]

The details of how school functions to reproduce unjust social structures in particular contexts matter. And they must be theoretically articulated in order to make progress in providing a new political vision for education. We cannot begin to transform our education system in the hope of changing society without a clearer sense of these mechanisms. At the same time, we should not lose sight of the macro perspective that critical theorists are right to bring to our attention. In my view, a better way of understanding the interactions between these different social systems and of theorizing social change is by focusing on the level of social practices against the background of their complex interactions with systems, structures, and individuals.

A promising avenue is complexity theory, which gives us the conceptual tools and vocabulary to study the interconnections between 'macro' or system-level properties, 'meso' or practice-level properties, and 'micro' or individual and interpersonal level ones.[4] For example, the growing rate of homeschooled children in the U.S. is a macro-level property that is not well-explained by simply considering the actions of individual parents. It emerges from a series of complex interactions between individual choice architectures, past and present education laws and policies (e.g. many public schools categorized as 'failing' under the No Child Left Behind legislation), societal events (e.g. the crisis of the pandemic), and changing social meanings and

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[2] Aronowitz, Stanley. "Preface to the Morningside Edition" in Willis, Paul. *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. Columbia University Press, 1981, p. xi.

[3] Willis, Paul. *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. Columbia University Press, 1981, p. 205.

[4] For an explanation of the *micro*, *meso*, and *macro* levels of social analysis, see Haslanger, Sally. *Benjamin Lecture 1* (2023), p. 2. Complexity theory is a collection of theoretical tools and models developed in a wide range of disciplines, from mathematics and the natural sciences to social studies. Complex dynamic systems in all these fields have been defined in terms of a series of core properties, including emergence – the presence of properties at higher levels of the system that are not reducible to the properties exhibited by components at lower levels – and non-linearity, whereby radically different effects in the evolution of a system can result from small differences in their initial states. See, for example, Holland, John H. *Complexity: A very short introduction*. OUP Oxford, 2014; Mitchell, Sandra D. "Emergence: Logical, functional and dynamical." *Synthese* 185 (2012): 171-186; Ladyman, James, James Lambert, and Karoline Wiesner. "What is a complex system?." *European Journal for Philosophy of Science* 3 (2013): 33-67.

narratives in schools, families, and religious communities. In turn, the systemic growth of homeschooling shapes and structures individual judgments and decisions. Parents' deliberation on whether to homeschool their children might involve similar abstract values across contexts – e.g. safety, academic achievement, autonomy, care, etc. – but both the content of these considerations, as well as their salience and weight, are to a large extent determined by the social practices of their communities. Cultural narratives surrounding parents' rights and 'school choice' played an important part in shaping both individual decision-making and our present institutional and legal structures.

By connecting these levels, complexity theory can provide *explanations* of social systems, rather than macro-level statements that treat the inner workings of the system as a black box.[5] A system can be defined as a concrete, historically evolving set of things with a particular structure of relations.[6] *Social* systems produce, distribute, and dispose of resources via *practices*, i.e. culturally mediated patterns of responsiveness and interaction that establish social relations among participants.[7] In this framework, *education is a subsystem* of our complex dynamic society formed by a number of practices, from teaching and school administration to district governance and state or national educational policymaking. The relations established by these practices range from highly formal and institutionalized – e.g. education law, school rules and policies, district funding mechanisms, teachers' unions, etc. – to informal, loosely defined or implicit expectations and social meanings in individual classrooms, teachers' meetings, principals' offices, and district boards. Educational practices organize the various individuals that occupy roles in the social structure (student, teacher, parent, board member, janitor, etc.) around resources ranging from the material (classrooms, gyms, books, buses, salaries) to the less tangible (knowledge, grades, academic credentials).

[5] Bunge, Mario. "Mechanism and explanation." *Philosophy of the social sciences* 27, no. 4 (1997): 410-465.
[6] See Haslanger, Sally. "Systemic and Structural Injustice: Is There a Difference?." *Philosophy* 98, no. 1 (2023): 1-27; and Haslanger, Sally. "Intersecting Social Systems and the Reproduction of Injustice." Tanner Lecture (University of Michigan) 2023.
[7] Haslanger, "Intersecting Social Systems and the Reproduction of Injustice", p. 8.

The framework of education as a *subsystem* is helpful for conceptualizing these different elements as interconnected parts of a whole. By contrast, narrowing our view of education to the micro relations in a classroom can only yield limited insights, and might even be misleading. Analyzing the interactions of a teacher and her students requires paying attention to their embeddedness in practices and structures at the district, state, and federal levels. For example, the differential emphasis a teacher places on music as compared to chemistry might seem arbitrary or a result of individual preference unless viewed as an effect of national practices of standardized testing. Similarly, ignoring interpersonal and group interactions and only looking at higher-level phenomena such as laws and policies means losing sight of the cumulative, non-linear effects of seemingly disparate actions. Policies in favor of charter schools might appear unintelligible if not connected to specific histories of interactions at the level of classrooms, school and district boards, parents-teachers associations, as well as interest group and partisan dynamics in state and national legislatures.[8]

This more complex social ontology has the major advantage of refraining from the sweeping claims found in some critical theories about the causal and explanatory priority of both one level over another and of one system over another.[9] In particular, it avoids general claims about how capitalism determines education. Rather than understanding society as a hierarchy of nested subsystems that follow rigid laws of determination, it allows us to see an imbrication of multiple overlapping systems that coevolve.[10] This is because subsystems are not discrete, mutually exclusive entities that compete for social space. Each subsystem takes the other ones as its environment, rather than being subordinated or dominant in a hierarchy.[11] As Sylvia Walby argues,

[8] For an even more concrete example of the complex dynamics and feedback loops involved in state education policy, see the case of the first religious charter school recently approved in Oklahoma (https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/05/us/oklahoma-first-religious-charter-school-in-the-us.html).

[9] Even some of the critical theorists who recognize other relatively autonomous subsystems within capitalist society, such as Nancy Fraser, give priority to capitalism and the subsystem of production. Fraser, for example, argues that the realms of care, nature, and political power "are part and parcel of capitalist society, historically co-constituted in tandem with its economy, and marked by their symbiosis with it." (Fraser, Nancy. *Cannibal capitalism: How our system is devouring democracy, care, and the Planetand what we can do about it*. Verso Books, 2022, p. 19).

[10] Walby, Sylvia. "Complexity theory, systems theory, and multiple intersecting social inequalities." *Philosophy of the social sciences* 37, no. 4 (2007): 449-470.

[11] Walby, p. 458-459.

the subsystem does not "saturate the space or territory that it is in," but overlaps and in some cases is co-integrated and co-evolves with other subsystems.[12] The same individuals, buildings, roads, are parts of multiple subsystems in virtue of being integrated in multiple practices and social relations. In the case of education, Sally Haslanger notes,

> a school may be part of an educational system, but also a health care system (school nurses are a front line in monitoring child health and safety), a criminal justice system (school staff are mandated reporters and increasingly security guards monitor schools for criminal activity), and a real estate system (housing prices reflect neighborhood school quality).[13]

The idea of co-integration allows us to recognize that even though we can *treat* the educational subsystem as separate from other subsystems of society such as healthcare, criminal justice, or production, this is not an ontological claim of independence or separateness. Instead, it is a model crafted to yield helpful explanations by intentionally abstracting from social processes to isolate particular causal interactions rather than others.[14]

Building on these insights, I argue that we can best understand the educational subsystem by attending to the overlap and co-integration of the family, the state, and economic production. These subsystems are in turn governed by a combination of logics. A social 'logic' is a structural pattern of interaction among agents and between agents and the world. Such patterns arise out of the cultural norms, values, and assumptions that enable individuals to coordinate their actions around material resources.[15] However, they should be distinguished from these norms, values, and assumptions that guide the behaviors of individuals in social practices, such as a teacher's understanding of their role responsibilities or the rules of classroom decorum that students internalize. The logics I am interested in can help us as well as participants in the practice make sense of their behaviors, but they are not themselves action-guiding. This is why they often look alien to the agents engaged in the social actions the logics shape.

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[12] Ibid, p. 459-460.
[13] Haslanger, "Intersecting Social Systems and the Reproduction of Injustice", p. 12.
[14] For a broader understanding of how explanations can be compatible or in competition at different levels of analysis, see Mitchell, Sandra D. "Integrative pluralism." *Biology and Philosophy* 17 (2002): 55-70.
[15] I am drawing here on Sally Haslanger's Benjamin Lecture 1 (2023), p. 11, which among other sources cites the organizational institutionalism literature – see Thornton, Patricia H., and William Ocasio. "Institutional logics." *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* 840, no. 2008 (2008): 99-128, especially p. 100-107.

For example, education, healthcare, and transportation are all shaped by a capitalist logic of production that is inextricably linked with a logic of racialization and a gendered logic of caregiving. As institutionalized domains of the state, education and healthcare are also governed by a democratic logic that is often in conflict with and ends up being encroached or overtaken by competing logics.[16] In other words, the social activity of individuals will tend towards the pursuit of profit and capital accumulation, as well as the reproduction of gender and race hierarchies. These logics are *structural* because individual participants in these practices – policymakers, adult citizens, children, etc. – are usually unaware of their contributions to reproducing hierarchical social relations of class, race, and gender. Participants can nevertheless come to understand their role in perpetuating these relations and collectively attempt to alter their practices – by changing agential, cultural, and material resources.

In my view, schools act as a *mediating subsystem* between the private nuclear family on one hand and economic production and the polity on the other. Through gendered caregiving labor, the family socializes agents with particular dispositions and practical orientations that play a major role in determining the path of children's further socialization in school. The logic of fragmentation, I will argue, reproduces the class and race positions that children are born into while maintaining the liberal democratic façade of equal opportunity and meritocracy. Schools build on this family background and socialization, reinforcing and in some cases resisting it, by seeking to integrate children into existing roles in society – both within economic production and within the polity.

Schools in turn shape each of these subsystems. The logic of alienation in education forms subjects who lack the collective power and the self-consciousness of their potential to change existing social arrangements. Schools help sustain and reproduce the family subsystem through a very specific division of caregiving labor between the family and teachers. They also form students

[16] I am following Walby's understanding of institutional domain as "an elaborated version of the conventional distinctions between economy, polity, and civil society" (459).

as gendered subjects who will go on to maintain the care subsystem and the divide between the public and private institutional domains. Finally, schools sustain and reproduce the spheres of economic production and the polity and their dynamic co-integration. The logic of commodification that organizes education currently reinforces a dominance of capitalist production over democratic collective self-determination.

II. Evaluative Dimension – Alienation, Commodification, Fragmentation

By paying close attention to the intersecting and coevolving logics that shape the domain of education, we can explain *what is specific to schools* as sites of interpellation. In the following sections I evaluate three logics that shape education: i) alienation – the educational system fails to actualize and in fact inhibits the development of students' and teachers' collective powers; ii) commodification – the provision and organization of education as a market distorts its functioning and prevents it from realizing its internal goals; and iii) fragmentation – a tiered education system sustains unjust outcomes in the educational realm, as well as gender oppression in the family.

These three logics are instances of *social pathologies*, by which I mean social processes that are in some way dysfunctional. Human societies are "functionally organized entities" that rely on specialized and coordinated parts for their reproduction.[17] Much like an ill biological organism, a pathological society or social subsystem is characterized by an "impairment or breakdown" of one of its functions.[18] However, unlike most diagnoses of animal illness, identifying a social illness is a form of *critique*. Human societies and their various practices and institutions are artificial in the sense of human-made, which means that their ends or functions are an expression of human freedom. Diagnosing social pathology is therefore a way of critiquing ourselves and taking up the practical imperative to change the malfunctions of our societies.[19] Moreover, labeling a particular subsystem as pathological goes beyond describing an *injustice*. Even though many social pathologies

[17] Neuhouser, Frederick. *Diagnosing Social Pathology: Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, and Durkheim*. Cambridge University Press, 2022, p. 104.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid, p. 25.

entail dimensions of injustice or have unjust effects, to say that a society is ill goes beyond saying that it is unjust. As Frederick Neuhouser puts it, social pathologies are "failures in realizing the good, broadly construed, rather than in achieving the right".[20] This implies a conception of social ends and a more robust theory of human flourishing than the one liberal theories of justice propose.

The function of modern education, based on the critical social ontology introduced in the previous chapter, is to secure human flourishing. As I show in this chapter and the next, this entails achieving a high degree of collective freedom. My conception of freedom is importantly different from and thicker than that of either liberal or democratic theories. First, it is not a purely procedural conception of freedom. What matters is not merely that individual agents or political communities make autonomous decisions, using their reasoning capacities in ways that are not subject to undue interference. The freedom that critical theories articulate is one that refers to the actual exercise of collective control over our social practices, which entails historically and culturally specific abilities and knowledge.

The plasticity of our social practices corresponds to a plasticity of human nature – by which I mean our needs and capacities, as well as what it means to flourish for beings like us. For this reason, critical theorists usually leave underspecified the specific outcomes or conceptions of the good that we should be pursuing. But just because the standard of human flourishing that we should be striving for is dynamic and open to revision does not mean that it is not a substantive normative standard. In the following sections, through critiques of alienation, commodification, and fragmentation, I will work towards this standard *via negativa*. The subsequent chapter, in developing concrete proposals for transforming the education system, articulates a positive ideal of human flourishing to accompany the critical conception of freedom.

[20] Ibid, p. 11.

A. Alienation in Education

In this section, I advance a critique of education as a social practice where students relate to themselves, their learning, and the products of their educational activity in an alienated fashion. Alienation is a distorted or pathological relation between an agent and other agents or objects in the world, rather than a psychological phenomenon.[21] Given our nature as self-conscious collective agents who transform ourselves as we transform the world, our social activity is free only if it meets certain standards of self-consciousness and self-determination.[22] Unalienated activity is i) transparent in its aims and effects to the human beings who undertake it; ii) controlled and directed by them; and iii) conducive to the good life of human beings, and therefore affirmable by them.[23]

In this understanding, alienation – or human activity that is opaque, externally imposed, and does not promote the good – is essentially an objective condition. Although it can be accompanied by a certain phenomenology and consciousness of one's alienation, it need not be. For this reason, the social critique I articulate in this section is itself likely to seem alien to many of the agents engaged in educational practice, including students and teachers. Alienation represents a pattern of interaction between agents and the world that is neither specific to capitalism, nor present only in capitalist production. Moreover, much like in economic production, alienation in education is by no means *total* – there are plenty of activities and ways of relating that remain free in the sense just discussed. But the logic of alienation shapes the domain of education in important ways. Students, teachers, and parents unwittingly reproduce it through many of their activities, even as they resist it in others.[24]

[21] See Marx, Karl. *1844 Manuscripts, Collected Works Vol. 3, Marx & Engels Collected Works*; Ollman, Bertell. *Alienation: Marx's conception of man in a capitalist society*. Vol. 9. Cambridge University Press, 1976; Jaeggi, Rahel. *Alienation*. Columbia University Press, 2014.
[22] For a discussion of the ideal of unalienated social powers in Hegel and Marx, see Neuhouser, Frederick. *Diagnosing Social Pathology: Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, and Durkheim*. Cambridge University Press, 2022, p. 69-80.
[23] Neuhouser, p. 74.
[24] As Feenberg puts it with respect to reification, "This process arises from the immanent cultural contradictions of capitalism, contradictions between reified social patterns and living human beings who resist the imposition of the reified forms even as they unwittingly reproduce them through their everyday practical activities." I agree with the content of this view but believe that reification is better understood as a 'social logic' rather than a 'cultural category', like alienation and fragmentation (Feenberg, Andrew. *The philosophy of praxis: Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School*. Verso Books, 2014, p. 67.)

The logic of alienation that pervades educational practices severs the link between the growth of individuals' powers and their individual and collective freedom. When education is subordinated to external demands for certain kinds of subjects (namely, agents who can fulfil existing roles in the system of production) education tends toward instrumentalization at the expense of the enrichment of students' experience and continued growth. By instrumentalization I mean that school work often tends not to be carried out in pursuit of an end internal to the activity itself, but for purely extrinsic rewards or avoidance of punishment.[25] If asked why they wrote an essay or solved a mathematical equation, most students would say "to receive credit for the assignment" or "to avoid a bad grade". This leads students to relate to their own learning as alien – that is, an activity that is not fully transparent or self-conscious, and therefore not an expression or expansion of their own freedom. This should concern anyone who thinks that one of the fundamental ends of education is freedom. It should be especially concerning to theorists sympathetic to the critical conception of human freedom as the collective capacity to remake our social arrangements and ourselves.

To be sure, alienation characterizes many subsystems of contemporary society. But alienation in education, I argue here, is primordial. The school socializes students into an alienated pattern of relating to each other and the world that *structures their subsequent relations in all other institutional domains*. Hence, analyzing alienation in the context of education provides a more complex picture of the co-integration of the education and production subsystems, one that transcends claims of economic determinism.

Alienation is rarely connected to education in the critical theory or philosophy of education literatures. One of the few attempts to do so is Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis' 1977 book *Schooling in Capitalist America,* which argues that there is a "close correspondence between the social relationships which govern personal interaction in the workplace and the social relationships of

[25] Dewey 1997, p. 204.

the educational system."[26] They identify a number of levels of 'correspondence' between the U.S. education system and capitalist production processes, including a hierarchical division of labor and high levels of competition.[27]

Many have criticized this correspondence approach for its excessive functionalism and determinism, its emphasis on class at the expense of gender and race, as well as its downplaying of teacher and student agency and of struggles and contradictions. While I sympathize with these criticisms, I take the core insight of the view to be true: there are striking similarities between how students relate to the process of learning within schools and the way they later participate in production. However, contra Bowles and Gintis, this is neither particularly surprising nor specific to capitalism. Consider the differences between the training that feudal lords and noblemen received from private tutors, the apprenticeship of craftsmen under masters and in guilds, and the institutional organization of clergy education. Denying that processes of production and education are in some ways connected would be just as implausible as claiming that the production system is wholly determinative of the educational one.

I propose a more nuanced understanding of the relation between education and labor within capitalism that resists the correspondence thesis, according to which classroom organization 'mirrors' or 'reflects' the structure of production because it is determined by the latter. Instead, we should see education and production as interdependent subsystems characterized by the same logic: alienation. Before spelling out the logic of alienation in education, I offer a brief

[26] Bowles, Samuel, and Herbert Gintis. *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*, BasicBooks, 1977, p. 12.

[27] They argue that: i) the organization of power in schools and classrooms replicates the vertical and hierarchical capitalist division of labor – school administration exercises bureaucratic control over teachers, who in turn exercise control over children in the classroom; ii) the main motivation for students within the educational process is not intrinsic – learning the knowledge or skills that are transmitted in classrooms – but external, either through the pursuit of rewards (high grades, awards, diplomas, etc.) or fear of the threat of failure; this dynamic mirrors most workers' relation to their labor, which is a means to wages and the avoidance of unemployment, rather than an end in itself; iii) relations among students parallel those among workers in that they are characterized by competition and the division of activity through specialization; the compartmentalization of knowledge and the incentive to specialize based on one's talents and strengths corresponds to the division of labor in capitalist production; iv) the content of education is stratified in a way that supports later hierarchies in production between managers and subordinates, high- and low-skilled workers.

reconstruction of the philosophical concept of alienation and empirical approaches to studying and measuring it.

Human beings have certain natural powers (understood very broadly as functions or capacities) which they share with other living beings, such as eating and drinking, as well as distinctively human powers that make them unique as a species, such as our socialized human senses and our abilities to reason and love. [28] We become aware of and grow our powers through our needs: we desire something that is not immediately available and in pursuing it we realize a corresponding power. The satisfaction of our needs requires *appropriating* objects external to us – everything from nature to things we have made and to other human beings. 'Appropriation' refers to "a particular mode of seizing possession" that involves making an object – whether a material thing, an idea, or a social role – our own by incorporating or internalizing it, and in this process changing both that object and ourselves.[29]

'Work' can therefore be defined as end-oriented appropriation, or producing things that have use or value for us. It includes everything from making material objects like food and furniture to creating religious customs and creeds, poems, and laws.[30] Work is at once the exercise of our combined powers and the means by which we expand them. Through working to fulfill our needs and realize our powers, we transform our world and give rise to both new needs and new powers. At different historical stages of human societies, our powers and needs are developed in very different forms and at varying levels due to developments in our productive activity. For example, the need for an electronic device with internet access in most contemporary societies is a result of the current stage of development of our productive powers.

Against this background, alienation can be understood as a distorted or pathological way of relating to the world and oneself – "an impairment of acts of appropriation".[31] Alienation entails

[28] Ollman, Bertell. *Alienation: Marx's conception of man in a capitalist society*. Vol. 9. Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 73-76. Conversely, "a power is whatever is used that 'fulfills' a need" (p. 76).
[29] Rahel Jaeggi emphasizes this dialectical aspect when she argues that "appropriation always means a transformation at both poles of the relation." (Jaeggi, p. 38, 36.)
[30] Ibid, p. 98.
[31] Jaeggi, p. 36; Neuhouser 2022, p. 13.

a distortion of the relation between work and human beings' needs and powers. Alienated activity puts one's powers to use in pursuit of externally imposed goals, rather than freely chosen ones. Insofar as it fulfils needs, these are needs that are not consciously shaped or endorsed. The connection between powers and the fulfilment of needs is thus severed – we exercise our powers and capacities only instrumentally. Under capitalism, according to Marxist theorists, rather than being an avenue for developing our powers, work "consumes these powers without replenishing them, burns them up as if they were a fuel, and leaves the individual worker that much poorer".[32] Most people work merely in order to maintain their physical existence, rather than in conscious pursuit of their self-realization and flourishing.

Since most critical theorists have developed their accounts of alienation with a focus on relations of production, Bowles and Gintis' suggestion that schools socialize us for these relations seems natural. Unfortunately, it obscures the dynamics specific to education. *Rather than seeing the educational system as training students for alienated labor, I argue we should understand the school itself as a social practice characterized by a logic of alienation*. In other words, education is not preparation for alienation, it is itself alienating.

Empirical studies have not sufficiently integrated this notion of alienation in their approach. The focus of most sociological or education policy research on alienation in education has been on the subjective dimensions of the phenomenon. For example, a number of authors writing on education draw on sociologist Melvin Seeman's empirical operationalization of alienation, which differentiates between six measurable varieties or manifestations: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, self-estrangement, and social isolation.[33] All of these are meant to capture psychological phenomena – for example, powerlessness refers to agents' felt sense of low control over their activities and meaninglessness to a sense of incomprehensibility. Sociological and psychological studies on education have mainly adopted this

[32] Ollman, p. 137.
[33] Seeman, Melvin. "Alienation studies." *Annual review of sociology* 1, no. 1 (1975): 91-123, p. 93.

subjective focus and have demonstrated the connection between some students' feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation on one hand and behaviors such as low participation, school dropout, disciplinary issues, and low levels of life satisfaction and well-being.[34]

My analysis is in part supported by these empirical findings, but it goes beyond them in important ways. Some of the subjective aspects of alienation these studies document are indicative of the objective relations of alienation I am interested in. But there is no *necessary* connection between feeling alienated and being alienated in the sense relevant to my analysis. The logic of alienation that I articulate in this section is an objective structural pattern that characterizes the experience of all students and teachers in contemporary schools – not just the experience of students who are disengaged, failing, or underserved. Even empirical analyses that integrate more objective aspects of alienation, such as lack of power in school governance or low levels of interaction between teachers and students because of large class sizes, are too narrowly focused on specific schools and assume that school-level reforms could combat or even eliminate alienation.[35] I argue that the logic of alienation has broader structural causes. Because of its co-integration with economic production in particular, contemporary education is characterized by an alienated relation of students to their activity (learning), each other, and their teachers.

First, students are alienated from the activity of learning. Learning understood as the *internal* end of education entails both the development of pupils' powers and the fulfillment of their needs. It is inherently valuable, insofar as the development of children's abilities and knowledge is part of their flourishing, as well as instrumentally valuable in terms of the other opportunities for flourishing it opens up. Crucially, learning is conducive to the development of our distinctively human capacity to freely remake our social and political arrangements and change

[34] Hascher, Tina, and Andreas Hadjar. "School alienation–Theoretical approaches and educational research." *Educational Research* 60, no. 2 (2018): 171-188; Morinaj, Julia, and Tina Hascher. "School alienation and student well-being: A cross-lagged longitudinal analysis." *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 34 (2019): 273-294; Mau, Rosalind Y. "The validity and devolution of a concept: Student alienation." *Adolescence* 27, no. 107 (1992): 731; Newmann, Fred. "Reducing student alienation in high schools: Implications of theory." *Harvard educational review* 51, no. 4 (1981): 546-564.

[35] See, for example, Newmann 1981.

our own nature in this process. As Dewey puts it, "the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth".[36]

Contemporary schools distort both the intrinsic and instrumental aspects of learning. Because of the school's role in the social reproduction of our present system, what often guides curriculum content and classroom activity is not primarily the expansion of children's powers and the fulfillment of their needs, but meeting certain externally imposed standards of performance. These standards are shaped by the co-integration of the education subsystem with the production subsystem: schools form agents who are productive in and committed to our present social order. This social order is in turn not conducive to most people's flourishing. The development of our human powers and the satisfaction of our needs are at best contingently realized under current economic arrangements, at worst sacrificed to imperatives of profit and accumulation.

We need not look to critical theorists for a genealogy of this phenomenon. Orthodox human capital theory, which has dominated economic and policy analysis since the mid-20th century, explicitly defines education as an investment in skills meant to increase future wages and economic growth.[37] The theory is entirely economistic and instrumental – return on investment is nothing other than the market value of an individual, as measured by their productivity and earnings.[38] Hence the motto of the human capital paradigm: *learning equals earning*.[39] Although human capital theory has been criticized by many education theorists and policy-makers, it has undoubtedly shaped both public policy and popular cultural understandings of education.[40] For example, the U.S. government regularly describes education in its economic reports as one of the 'key investments' in human capital, and measures its value by expected earnings and contribution

[36] Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, Ch. 8.
[37] Brown, Phillip, Hugh Lauder, and Sin Yi Cheung. *The death of human capital?: Its failed promise and how to renew it in an age of disruption*. Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 17. For the original proposals and defenses of human capital theory in education, see Schultz, Theodore W. "Investment in human capital." *The American economic review* 51, no. 1 (1961): 1-17; and Becker, Gary. *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education*. National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc, 1964.
[38] Robeyns, Ingrid. "Three models of education: Rights, capabilities and human capital." *Theory and research in education* 4, no. 1 (2006): 69-84, p. 72-73.
[39] Brown, Lauder, and Cheung, p. 19, 23.
[40] For a historical account of the growth of schools and the development of industrial and vocational education in the Boston area that complicates the simple human capital narrative, see Groeger, Cristina Viviana. *The education trap: Schools and the remaking of inequality in Boston*. Harvard University Press, 2021.

to economic productivity and growth.[41] While other values are pursued and realized in our education systems, human capital theory can be understood as the *limit* of the currently dominant logic. In seeking to subordinate learning to external demands of productivity and economic growth, it instrumentalizes education and leads to the alienation of students and teachers.

Our contemporary system of grading, predominant in most school systems across the world, is a central pillar of this human capital approach to education. This system emerged at the end of the 19th century as a standardized means of communication: by assigning grades, schools send a message to potential employers about students' competence and level of skill.[42] Hierarchical grading is primarily a mechanism of credentialing for further education and eventually jobs. As educators in the 'ungrading' movement have pointed out, there is little rationale for this practice of evaluation other than ranking students' skills for the benefit of future employers.[43] There would be no reason to measure children's learning and performance on a scale, sometimes with the expectation of a normal distribution, if there was no external need to compare their performance and achievement to each other. Educational assessment, if it is to follow the inner logic of learning rather than an externally imposed one, must be student-relative. What ought to matter is whether one's powers are enhanced through the educational process, rather than how one's performance compares at various points in the process to others'.

High-stakes standardized testing is the neoliberal educational reform that best captures the external standard for education. Their goal, as Wayne Au writes, is "to create simplified metrics to efficiently compare students, teachers, schools, states, and countries to each other, in order to say, *this* kid knows more than *that* kid, *that* teacher must be better than *this* other teacher, and *this* school/state/country is better at educating than *this* other school/state/country."[44] Unsurprisingly,

[41] See, for example, the Economic Report of the President, 2022, Chapter 4: "Investing in People: Education, Workforce Development, and Health".
[42] Schneider, Jack, and Ethan Hutt. "Making the grade: A history of the A–F marking scheme." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 46, no. 2 (2014): 201-224.
[43] See, for example, Kohn, Alfie, and Susan D. Blum. *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*. West Virginia University Press, 2020.
[44] Au, Wayne. *A Marxist education*. Haymarket Books, 2018, p. 77.

the empirical literature overwhelmingly suggests that standardized tests are inaccurate measures of both learning and teaching, but fairly good at tracking the resources and experiences of children outside of school, including poverty and precarity.[45] Moreover, these tests are usually designed to produce a normal distribution or bell curve of scores, meaning to fail a certain portion of students. Even when the tests are meant to measure students according to a certain criterion such as reading proficiency ('criterion-referenced tests'), rather than comparing their performances to each other ('norm-based tests'), the data is interpreted and analyzed with the expectation that it will produce a normal distribution.[46] Thus, they do not primarily aim at the development of particular competencies in all students, but at the differentiation and sorting of students for the purpose of admission into higher echelons of education and eventually the job market.

But why should we be concerned with forms of evaluation? How do they affect the educational experience prior to the moment of evaluation? I argue that grading and testing have distortive effects on the content of education, as well as teaching and learning. Given that schools are ranked in large part based on standardized measures of learning and achievement, they have an incentive not only to prioritize 'teaching to the test', but also to invest more educational resources in students whom the teachers perceive as capable of improving by these metrics. Whether implicitly or explicitly, teachers are pressured to channel their time and attention into students who are labeled as 'under-achieving', meaning falling below the benchmark of passing the standardized examination but assessed by the school as having the 'ability' to do so. This comes at the expense of giving extra support to the 'safe' students, who are already performing at the benchmark level. It also comes at the expense of assisting students labeled as 'beyond help' or 'hopeless', who are seen as unable to reach the benchmark even with extra support.[47] These categorizations unsurprisingly track class and race disadvantage:

[45] Ibid, p. 82-84.
[46] Ibid, p. 85-87.
[47] For a detailed analysis of this phenomenon of triage and what the authors call the 'A-C economy' of the school, see Gillborn, David, and Deborah Youdell. *Rationing education: Policy, practice, reform, and equity*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK), 1999, p. 149-151.

> White pupils and those not in receipt of free school meals are over-represented among the 'safe' group. At the other extreme, Black pupils and those in receipt of free school meals (a proxy for poverty) are over-represented among those believed to be beyond help.[48]

We can understand the specific form of alienation at play here as an instrumentalization of education. Students' learning and flourishing is not the end, but at best a means to externally imposed metrics of success. Alienated education therefore "intensifies into utter meaninglessness".[49] When learning understood as the development and expansion of students' powers is not the goal, but a process subordinated to external goals, education becomes a mechanical exercise of hierarchy and credentialing that no longer has meaning for those involved. Education as an activity loses its meaning when *students themselves become instruments to achieving higher grades or scores*. Human capital theory endorses this instrumental rationale for education when it assesses much of what students learn in schools as 'useless' for their later success in the job market. For example, some economists make the case against higher levels of education on account of their low returns on investment.[50] This is also the reasoning used to eliminate subjects of study not directly 'useful' for most people entering capitalist production, such as the arts and humanities. Insofar as one thinks that the development of people's powers and of their capacity to use their powers to pursue freely chosen ends is of value, the subordination of human development to external imperatives – whether those of capitalist free markets or of an authoritarian dictatorship – is a harm.

This instrumentalization gives rise to a teaching paradigm of *exchange*. At the classroom level, teachers give students knowledge and guidance in return for their respect and obedience.[51] As Paul Willis puts it, "the most important chain of exchanges is, of course, that of knowledge for

[48] Ibid, p. 163.
[49] Jaeggi, p. 13.
[50] See, for example, Caplan, Bryan. *The case against education: Why the education system is a waste of time and money*. Princeton University Press, 2018.
[51] The now-retired slogan of the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) charter schools, known for their neoliberal reforms for efficiency and standardized achievement, was an unintentional but revealing statement of this paradigm: "Work Hard, Be Nice". In other words, if you internalize school discipline, you will reap rewards. (Levin, David. "Why KIPP Has Retired 'Work Hard. Be Nice'", July 2020. https://www.kipp.org/news/why-kipp-has-retired-work-hard-be-nice/)

qualifications, qualified activity for high pay, and pay for goods and services".[52] Grades are an intermediate link, a 'possession' that one receives in exchange for right answers and accumulated information, and can then trade in for college or a job.[53] But the exchange can only happen if students already recognize the value of the information that teachers can impart, either intrinsically or instrumentally, as a means to maximizing their future earnings. While the paradigm is alienating to all students, it affects and is experienced differently by students depending on their social and economic positions.

Working-class students tend to not accept the terms of this exchange to the same extent as middle-class ones. As Jean Anyon shows in her study of working-class schools in New Jersey, the dominant mode of interaction in classrooms was students resisting teachers, either through passive attitudes or active sabotage.[54] For various reasons, including financial pressures to start working as soon as they can, some working-class children never come to perceive the teaching exchange as a fair one. They are alienated from their learning process insofar as they regard it as useless for the 'real world' they are already part of and expect to remain in after their mandatory schooling is over. If school is a means for getting a job, but one already has a job in spite of being 'behind' in school in many cases, the rationale for learning seems to fall apart. Willis documents this phenomenon in his ethnography of working-class secondary school pupils in an English industrial town:

> Sometimes more than one job is held. Over ten hours a week is not uncommon. From the fourth form onwards, Spike thinks his work at a linen wholesaler's is more important than school. He gladly takes days and weeks off school to work. He is proud of the money he earns and spends: he even contributes to his parents' gas bill when they've had 'a bad week'. Joey works with his brother as a painter and decorator during the summer. He regards that as 'real' work, and school some kind of enforced holiday. There is no doubt that this ability to 'make out' in the 'real world' […] and to deal with adults nearly on their own terms strengthens 'the lads' self-confidence and their feeling, at this point anyway, that they 'know better' than the school.[55]

[52] Willis, Paul. *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. Columbia University Press, 1981, p. 64.
[53] See Jean Anyon's comparative discussion of working, middle-class, and elite schools with respect to this 'exchange' in Anyon, Jean. *Marx and education*. Taylor & Francis, 2011, p. 27.
[54] Anyon, 2011, p. 24.
[55] Ibid, p. 39.

Alienation from the learning process sometimes presents this subjective dimension. Many students do not experience education as a fulfillment or expansion of their own powers, but at best as an instrumental activity and at worst as a distraction from or interruption of their lives and life plans. Readings, assignments, class discussions are inputs for high marks and diplomas, rather than opportunities to develop one's skills and knowledge. Students' agency and powers are enlisted in the process, but not in a way that is conducive to freedom and self-realization. Schools rely on students' motivation, but this motivation is more often than not tied to earning high grades, outcompeting other students, and earning the degree required by a particular job. The experience of looking back at one's years of schooling as merely instrumental to getting one's degree is fairly common. This is why many students share the neoliberal perspective on the 'useless' subjects, meaning the ones that have not directly contributed to their professional productivity.

In the case of working-class students who are rightfully skeptical of the teaching paradigm of exchange, the attainment of good grades, teachers' recognition, and qualifications are perceived as entirely pointless. These students are already part of the 'real world', so the goal of preparing for one's professional future seems miscalibrated. Because these students reject the idea that there is a deep continuity between the world of the school and the world of work, they are suspicious that any skills or qualification the school could provide them might be useful:

> At a certain level they really feel that they know better. It is possible to get on without qualifications and school work because what really matters is 'knowing a bit about the world', 'having your head screwed on' […] Qualifications, to them, seem to be a deflection or displacement of direct activity. They feel that they can always demonstrate any necessary ability 'on the job', and that the doing of a thing is always easier than the account of it, or its representation in an exam, or its formal description seem to imply.[56]

This subjective sense of meaninglessness, coupled with the embarrassment, indignities, and ridicule often experienced in the classroom by students who fail or fall behind in school, propel these students towards unskilled or low-skilled labor and away from higher education. Even though they do not expect to find much meaning in their work, jobs are seen as an escape from the illegitimate

[56] Willis, p. 94.

authority of their teachers and the confinement they experience in classrooms.[57] Students are not simply 'drafted into' into low-skilled or unskilled jobs by the educational state apparatus. Their entry into these jobs is a manifestation of the agency that an alienating educational structure makes possible. If learning is not experienced as a need, then wages that can fulfill actual needs seem preferable. Alienated labor appears more attractive than alienated schooling.

Most striking given these different orientations towards school – across students who internalize the dominant pedagogical culture and those who resist it – is that students nevertheless experience the educational process as largely unfree. Students often perceive school activities and homework as a burden that restricts their activity or 'busy work', rather than an increase of their powers and capacities.[58] Time spent not learning and not in school is liberating. But just like in the case of productive labor, the fact that many children hate school and see their 'free time' outside of it as more conducive to fulfillment and their self-development is taken for granted. In a recent large national survey, U.S. high school students across demographic groups reported mostly negative feelings towards their school experience. A staggering 75% of feelings reported in open-ended questions were negative and "the three most frequently mentioned feelings were tired, stressed, and bored". [59] In my view, far from being inevitable, this is a devastating indictment of the educational system.[60]

Alienation from the process of education translates into alienation from its products as well. These 'products' include the students' powers and abilities to act in the world, objectified and realized through activities and assignments. But alienating education distorts this relationship by making students relate to their own work not as an expression of their powers and a way of

[57] Ibid, p. 100-104.
[58] See, for example, Letterman, Denise. "Students' perception of homework assignments and what influences their ideas." *Journal of College Teaching & Learning (TLC)* 10, no. 2 (2013): 113-122. Students feel free whenever they are *not* developing their distinctively human capacities and skills through learning. They find freedom in consumption, entertainment, passive enjoyment. In his critique of alienated labor, Marx referred to this phenomenon by the adage "what is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal" (Marx, Karl. *1844 Manuscripts*, Collected Works Vol. 3, *Marx & Engels Collected Works*).
[59] Moeller, Julia, Marc A. Brackett, Zorana Ivcevic, and Arielle E. White. "High school students' feelings: Discoveries from a large national survey and an experience sampling study." *Learning and Instruction* 66 (2020): 101301.
[60] What seems particularly surprising, as bell hooks has pointed out, is that not even critical and radical pedagogy theorists examine the idea that learning should be pleasurable and exciting to students. (hooks, bell. *Teaching to transgress*. Routledge, 2014, p. 7).

expanding them, but as externally imposed and alien. Students treat the abilities they develop in school not as "organic parts" of their personality, but as things they can "'own' or 'dispose of' like the various objects of the external world".[61] Think here of the degree of removal of most students from their homework, their tests, and most of the work they do in the classroom. Such work is rarely pursued out of a felt need to realize and increase one's powers. It is most often merely a means to an end – getting a good grade, passing the class, obtaining the degree.

This alienation from the process and products of education is further increased by its organization into isolated, discrete disciplines that are not connected to each other or to students' experiences. Rather than increasing their ability to critically perceive and act in the world, education is often "completely alien to the existential experience of the students."[62] In fact, activities in traditional classrooms are often so divorced from students' own lives that they are not accessible to them in circumstances other than the context of learning.[63] There is little connection, for example, between the biology presented by primary school textbooks and students' interaction with the natural world, their own bodies, and nonhuman animals in their daily lives. Moreover, the study of the natural world is not usually connected to the study of social and political issues related to human beings' appropriation of the natural world. This approach fails to make the present experiences of students meaningful to them and as a result does not equip them with the desire to keep learning.[64]

Finally, the present system of education alienates students from each other and from their teachers. Given hierarchical grading and rankings, students quickly become aware that they are participating in a competitive rather than cooperative endeavor. The grade and test-based incentive system, coupled with other mechanisms of selection such as tracking and "gifted programs", encourage self-centered and even selfish behavior while discouraging cooperation and mutual help.

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[61] Lukács, György. *History and class consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics*. MIT Press, 1972, p. 100. Lukács provides this characterization of an alienated form of consciousness in the context of his broader critique of reification.
[62] Freire, Paulo. "Pedagogy of the oppressed (revised)." *Continuum,* 2005, p. 71.
[63] Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*, p. 48-49
[64] This is why Dewey calls an education that is oriented towards preparation for future work "self-defeating" (Ibid, p. 48-49).

At higher levels, students also become aware that they are competing for a 'seat' at the next stage of education – from middle school to high school, college, graduate school. Such attitudes and dispositions in the classroom pit individual learning and empowerment against collective empowerment. This diminishes students' ability to learn from and help each other. Appearing more knowledgeable or competent than the competition seems more important than actually gaining knowledge and competence. It is consequently an impediment to the enhancement of all students' powers.

Alienation also affects teachers. Aside from their alienation as workers under capitalism, there are a series of features pertaining to the teacher-student relation in the system of education that are distinctively alienating.[65] First, evaluating and disciplining students in accordance with the dominant norms and metrics alienates teachers from their students and their own activity. The imperative to rank students distorts mentoring relationships by shifting teachers' focus from meeting individual students' needs to applying a reductive metric as fairly and impartially as possible. Grades are an efficient mechanism for external communication, but a poor pedagogical tool. Moreover, as educational studies have shown, when constructive, formative feedback is accompanied by a grade, it loses much of its constructive potential.[66] It is no accident that standardized evaluation has developed hand in hand with teacher *deskilling*. Instructors are often not the ones in charge of designing, planning, and deliberating curricula and pedagogical strategies, but are simply executing standardized lessons using prepackaged materials.[67]

Second, the role of the teacher as disciplinarian and enforcer of school rules distorts the teacher-student relation. As I argue in the next section, this relation is best understood as one of

[65] Critical theorists in the Marxist tradition only acknowledge the alienation of teachers as workers. Marx himself writes that "a schoolmaster is a productive laborer, when, in addition to belaboring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of a sausage factory, does not alter the relation." (Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, *Collected Works Vol. 35, Marx & Engels Collected Works*).

[66] See, for example, Murtagh, Lisa, and Nadine Baker. "Feedback to feed forward: Student response to tutors' written comments on assignments." *Practitioner research in higher education* 3, no. 1 (2009): 20-28.

[67] Apple, Michael W. "Curricular form and the logic of technical control: Commodification returns." In *Knowledge, Power, and Education*, pp. 92-115. Routledge, 2012, p. 97-99. As Apple explains, a consequence of this separation of planning from execution in the work of teachers also results in alienated relationships among teachers: "With the increasing employment of prepackaged curricular systems as the basic curricular form, virtually no interaction between teachers is required. If nearly everything is rationalized and specified before execution, then contact among teachers about actual curricular matters is minimized." (p. 100)

care, which is incompatible with certain modes of rule enforcement. The distortion is by no means isolated to 'traditional' classrooms that uncritically enforce authoritarian teacher relations and 'carceral' disciplinarian policies. Progressive schools, by which I mean those employing experimental curricular methods or advancing social justice-oriented missions, are parts of the same nexus of co-integrated subsystems and hence subject to the same structural logics, albeit shaped by different norms and scripts in the classroom. For example, Savannah Shange's ethnography documents the successes and failures a progressive public school, one of the few public schools serving low-income communities of color in San Francisco, whose mission is "Community, Social Justice, Independent Thought".[68] The school was explicitly founded as a Deweyan academy of progressive schooling, seeking to resist oppressive racial hierarchies: "The walls are emblazoned with graffiti murals reading "Equity" and "Decolonize"; Audre Lorde and Frantz Fanon are enshrined in the core curriculum".[69]

Even though the school positions itself as a challenge to the school-to-prison pipeline for Black students, it still has disproportionately high numbers of behavioral referrals and suspensions for Black children.[70] The same patterns of alienation emerge from everyday teacher-student interactions even as they are couched in different social meanings, values, and role obligations. Complaining about students missing class and 'chilling' in the hallways, a teacher at the school urges the other educators to "stand their ground":

> As a school, we need it to be the Apocalypse to be in the hallway when you are not supposed to. The only ones who pop off on me are the ones I don't know, and honestly at that moment I don't care. This is not your school, right? This is our school. That's it. You can disrespect me, and you can get a referral — that's it. I am not going to provide therapy in the hallway, I am not going to think about your trauma. Get in your classroom — that is your only choice. We all need to flex on this a little bit. Often, when kids are being out of pocket in my class, I have them go outside and read the name on the door — I'm like, "That's not your name, that's my name. So what I said goes," and that's all it needs to be.

[68] Shange, Savannah. *Progressive dystopia: Abolition, antiblackness, and schooling in San Francisco*. Duke University Press, 2019, p. 79.
[69] Ibid, p. 2.
[70] Ibid, p. 85.

The teacher even prefaces these remarks by invoking the radical progressive philosophy of the school and insisting that "achieving a social justice mission meant holding kids to higher behavioral standards through increased disciplinary penalties".[71]

Approaching the educational encounter with the goal of delivering information and enforcing rules to prepare students for the 'real world' forecloses receptivity to both students' needs and to what they might have to offer in educational encounters. Rather than seeing students as people with whom one is in a joint collaborative endeavor, teachers in the present educational system are structurally incentivized to assume a position of superiority and absolute authority. The dominant conception of the educational relation demands obedience and rule-following from the students in exchange for 'achievement' measured by the dominant metrics. And the more one's own job as a teacher depends on students' performance by these metrics, the more incentivized one is to teach the subject matter that will be tested in a simplified and mechanical manner. The educational system therefore creates a situation in which teachers must sacrifice their own students' learning to external demands of efficiency and productivity. Challenges and disruptions that could lead to better educational outcomes in a cooperative learning environment are treated as fetters or obstacles in the alienated school.

B. Commodification in Education

The second critical analysis I propose concerns the commodification of education. Much like with respect to alienation, my argument is that commodification is a present tendency in education, rather than a totalizing phenomenon. Left unchecked, the logic of commodification tends to subsume more and more aspects of our educational practices – from access to schooling to educational products and the relation between educational 'providers' and 'consumers'. I start

[71] Ibid, p. 78.

this section with a brief explanation of commodities before proposing an account of the logic of commodification in education.

Under capitalism, products are sold and bought as commodities, meaning that they have two dimensions: a qualitative dimension of utility (use-value) and a quantitative dimension consisting of how much socially necessary labor time they embody (which is expressed as an exchange-value).[72] By abstracting from the nature of the labor – whether it is knitting, painting, or writing – as well as from the properties of the product – a scarf, a painting, or a poem – we are left with "the same unsubstantial reality in each, a mere congelation of homogeneous human labor".[73] It is precisely due to their nature as congealed labor that commodities can be given a price and be exchanged on markets. The commodity-form is dominant under capitalism because production is oriented primarily at the creation of exchange-values, rather than objects meant for immediate consumption.[74]

Central to the Marxian critique of commodity production and exchange under capitalism is that these practices create a distinct set of pernicious distortions and illusions. Social relations between human beings who objectify themselves in the world through their labor assume "the fantastic form of a relation between things".[75] This broader phenomenon has been theorized under the label '*reification*' (from the Latin 'res', meaning 'thing'). Commodification is a kind of reification – more specifically the primordial form of reification according to György Lukács, which causes all other forms of reification in capitalist societies.[76] Commodification has both objective and subjective aspects. In capitalist markets, commodities objectively take on a life of their own, which workers cannot control or influence. Individuals can observe the laws of market exchange, study them, and even use them to their own financial advantage, but cannot change them.[77] Subjectively, workers perceive and come to understand their own labor-power as a thing, just another

[72] Marx, Karl. *Capital*, Part I, Chapter I, Section 1-2. Collected Works Vol. 35, *Marx & Engels Collected Works*.
[73] Ibid, Section 1.
[74] Lukács, György. *History and class consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics*. MIT Press, 1972, p. 84.
[75] Marx, *Capital*, Part I, Chapter I, Section 4.
[76] Feenberg, p. 70.
[77] Lukács, p. 87.

commodity that can be traded in exchange, rather than the activity of a free agent in relation to the world and other human beings.[78] More broadly, the commodification of spheres of life and activities is a *social pathology* that goes beyond the unjust distributive effects that markets in education, healthcare, etc. might have:

> The issue here is what repercussions understanding certain goods as commodities and treating them in accordance with economic efficiency has for our understanding of ourselves as individuals and as a society and for the shape and functioning of our social practices.[79]

Education is increasingly commodified as its provision and access depend on an educational market. In the U.S., and many other countries to varying extents, public schools compete with semi-public and private education providers for students and funding. Moreover, all these institutions, whether public or private, are run at least partly in accordance with a market logic of increasing returns on investment, whether in terms of human capital, profit, or a combination of the two. Education is increasingly seen as an *investment* in children's productive skills. As such, it makes sense to compare teachers, schools, and even school systems by narrowly understood criteria of educational performance, such as scores on standardized achievement tests. The main result of the legislative reforms in the *No Child Left Behind* program and its successor *Race to the Top* has been a complete loss of focus on students' actual learning. Test scores themselves "became both the measure and the goal of education".[80]

The logic of commodification has also resulted in educational systems adopting a business-modeled 'audit culture', where independent supervisors evaluate the performance of teachers and schools, often in order to rank them or justify private firms taking control of 'failing' public institutions.[81] Indeed, *Race to the Top* federal legislation was explicitly conceived as a "competition for the states" for a prize of one billion dollars, in return for closing their own "lowest-performing"

[78] Lukács, p. 87.
[79] Jaeggi, Rahel, and Ciaran Cronin. *On the Critique of Forms of Life*. Belknap Press, 2018, p. 6.
[80] Ravitch, Diane. *Slaying Goliath: The passionate resistance to privatization and the fight to save America's public schools*. Vintage, 2020, p. 21.
[81] For a critical analysis of 'audit culture' in education, especially in the context of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiatives in the U.S., see Apple, Michael W. "Audit cultures, commodification, and class and race strategies in education." *Policy Futures in Education* 3, no. 4 (2005): 379-399.

public schools (based solely on test scores) and replacing them with charters.[82] Beyond school access, the provision of many key educational goods and services is market-based. A wide variety of firms and organizations are involved in selling textbooks, standardized tests, classroom technologies, tutoring and advising, food, transportation, and educational consulting and management services.[83]

The first problem with the commodification of education is that its use-value, meaning its actual ability to fulfill human needs, becomes secondary to its exchange-value. In other words, what is essential about education becomes contingent and what is contingent becomes essential. This perspective allows us to spell out a different dimension of what goes wrong when education is instrumentalized in the sense of being subordinated to external goals. The more aspects of the educational process are embedded in markets and organized according to a market model, the more their value is reduced to returns on investment. Education thus comes to be understood as an investment in human capital not just by economists, but also by educational providers (public or private) and parents – the paying customers. One's education is valuable insofar as it has exchange-value. Hence, what one learns in college or university is secondary to the value of the diploma on the job market.

To be sure, there are other values and criteria involved in our normative judgments about education. But, in my view, exchange-value is the *central* metric by which we assess our systems of education, and it has the potential to dominate and flatten all other kinds of value.[84] Any educational theorists who believes that the fulfillment of students' needs and the development of their capacities is the fundamental goal of education (what I called the *internal* purpose of education in the previous section) should be concerned by this development. Educational institutions from

[82] Ravitch, p. 23.

[83] As Diane Ravitch puts it, "The schools, once seen solely as institutions of teaching and learning, have been reimagined by corporations and entrepreneurs as places of commerce and profit. There is money to be made in selling tests, hardware, software, professional development, new curricula, new ways to analyze and utilize data, and consulting services for all of the above." (Ravitch, p. 6)

[84] See C. Thi Nguyen's analysis of standardized, quantified institutional metrics as instances of 'value capture' – the phenomenon by which simplified and reductive measures of value take over our practical deliberation without proper reflection or fine-tuning to our circumstances (Nguyen, Christopher. "Value capture." *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (2024)).

pre-K to university are making decisions about what and how to teach in large part based on what will secure themselves and their clients future market advantages. Disinvestment from arts and humanities at all levels of schooling is just an example of this phenomenon, but more insidious manifestations abound.[85] Schools are more likely to invest in aspects of the educational experience that will allow them to attract capital and consumers, rather than in what teachers judge to be most conducive to students' flourishing.

In short, schools become subject to the same kinds of pressures as other firms. They focus on easily measurable aspects of the educational experience – from standardized test scores and budgets for various amenities to quantities of research output in the case of universities – that are likely to give them a comparative advantage over other institutions. That actual learning is subsidiary is evidenced by the constantly changing goalposts. As Diane Ravitch argues in her critique of market-based disruption of education, metrics like test scores, graduation rates, parental satisfaction rates, and choice itself are invoked whenever convenient to promote a particular policy program or to privatize another portion of the educational system.[86]

The choice architecture for school boards and principals is deeply shaped by competitive pressures akin to any other industry. Whether one funds a high school drama club or a robotics club is often determined in terms of its perceived added value in college admissions. Much like the market for other commodities, branding and reputation come to matter more and more while the content and quality of the education provided matter less and less. [87] High school (and college) sports in the United States are another case in point. Although only a small fraction of their

[85] On disinvestment from arts education, see Rabkin, Nick, and Eric Christopher Hedberg. "Arts Education in America: What the Declines Mean for Arts Participation. Based on the 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts. Research Report# 52." *National Endowment for the Arts* (2011); Major, Marci L. "How they decide: A case study examining the decision-making process for keeping or cutting music in a K–12 public school district." *Journal of Research in Music Education* 61, no. 1 (2013): 5-25.
[86] Ravitch, Diane. *Slaying Goliath: The passionate resistance to privatization and the fight to save America's public schools*. Vintage, 2020, p. 9.
[87] Non-educator advisors hired to consult schools on marketing strategies are for many institutions a better investment than more money allocated to academic programs or teachers' salaries. As a communication and marketing advisor to elite private secondary schools and universities puts it, "The reason why a parent would choose one school over another comes down to brand. This encompasses reputation, recognition, offering, and competitive edge. [...] Both [private schools and corporations] have important branded collateral such as websites, several key publications, an array of printed promotional materials, event and conference tactics, digital and press advertising, signage and livery [badging on uniforms] and even outdoor poster campaigns." (Henebery, Brett. "How to market your school effectively", *The Educator,* 17 Oct 2017)

students actually play sports at this level – and there is an open question about whether this is conducive to their proper development – many educational institutions are now major actors in the sports business.[88] Indeed, many elite high schools try to recruit students on the basis of their athletic programs with no concern for the quality of the education student athletes will receive. In other words, rather than seeing each other as partners in a broad social mission of educating the next generation, schools compete for consumers and try to capture expanding shares of the market.

The commodification of educational goods and services goes hand in hand with the *reification* of educational relations. By being bought and sold on a market, the relations that constitute education become reified, i.e. a relation between people appears and is treated as a relation between things.[89] Students, parents, and even teachers increasingly come to think of the school as the provider of a *product*, rather than the institutionalization of an educational *relation* between students and teachers, embedded in the social networks of family and wider communities. This view is highly distorting because it assumes there is such a thing as an educational product that can be delivered in the same way and to the same effect *by* two different teachers and *to* two different groups of students.

But the educational encounter is inherently particularistic and relational. Individual students and teachers are not interchangeable parts that can be swapped out without altering the educational experience. Hence, reductively conceptualizing the content of education as 'information' transmitted is not only alienating but also a mischaracterization of the teacher-student relation. The character of this educational relation is best captured by feminist care ethics theories. Nel Noddings, for example, defines teaching as a caring relation that involves teachers' attentiveness to the needs expressed by their students, rather than simply the needs assumed by the curriculum or the school. Teachers care for their students by reflecting on their expressed

[88] It is not unusual, for example, for college football coaches to be among the highest paid public officials in a state (let alone at their respective institutions) and for high school coaches to receive much higher salaries than teachers.
[89] Marx 1867; Lukács 1923.

needs and responding to them or, if the needs cannot or should not be met, finding a different way to maintain the care relation.[90]

Under current educational arrangements the teacher-student care relation does not disappear. Rather, it is obscured and, as a consequence, distorted. If education is a commodity that can be advertised, bought, and sold like any other, teachers become interchangeable mediators between an existing educational product and students. One of the premises of standardized testing and evaluation is that teaching consists in delivering the same information to different students. While attempts at curriculum standardization are important for the goal of fair access to a high-quality education, the lack of freedom that teachers have with respect to designing their own lessons and evaluating their students' learning distorts the care relation. Standardized rubrics and grades flatten and simplify the process of teaching and learning and in doing so distort the particularity of the care relation, which crucially involves attentiveness to individual students' needs and interests. Teachers are disincentivized from giving students' needs the particularized attention they require if their performance is judged on the basis of students' test scores.

Crucially, parents also come to relate to teachers and the school in a distorted fashion under market relations. There is an extensive empirical literature on how affluent, highly educated parents involve themselves in their children's education, from using their cultural and social capital to influence policies at district level to monitoring teachers' activity and their children's school progress.[91] The marketization of education further reinforces parents' sense of their rights and entitlements *as consumers*. In fact, school choice policies treat parents as clients who either use vouchers or pay tuition directly to schools. This perspective further undermines the relationality of the educational encounter by portraying the individual teacher not as a personally significant caretaker in their children's lives, but rather as a replaceable service provider who is answerable to

[90] Noddings, Nel. "The caring relation in teaching." *Oxford review of education* 38, no. 6 (2012): 771-781, p. 772.
[91] See, for example, Lareau, Annette. "Social class differences in family-school relationships: The importance of cultural capital." *Sociology of education* (1987): 73-85; Lareau, Annette, Elliot B. Weininger, and Amanda Barrett Cox. "Parental challenges to organizational authority in an elite school district: The role of cultural, social, and symbolic capital." *Teachers College Record* 120, no. 1 (2018): 1-46.

the parent-client. The fact that so many current educational controversies center on parents' rights is a consequence of this shift in perspective.

Finally, the commodification of education reinforces parents' relation to each other not in solidarity, as co-participants in children's education, but rather as self-interested market agents in competition to secure positional goods for their own children.[92] Education is often not viewed as the common project or social relations parents are engaged in, but rather as a commodity they can individually buy for their children. In the case of elite or competitive schools, this is a commodity in limited supply that can only be accessed at the expense of other parents and their children. If your child takes a spot in the elite public, charter, or private school in our neighborhood, that means there is one fewer spot open for my children.

To conclude, I would like to propose an additional theoretical lens through which to understand the problem of commodifying education, namely Karl Polanyi's concept of 'fictitious commodities'. Polanyi characterizes the emergence of market society in terms of the buying and selling of the inputs of production (labor, land, and money).[93] He argues that the possibility of fully commodifying these is a *fiction*. Allowing the market mechanism of supply and demand to be the only arbiter of our labor-power, natural environments, and purchasing power would constitute the "demolition" of capitalist society through the erosion of the underlying processes and resources that sustain it.[94] As Nancy Fraser argues, society cannot be "commodities all the way down" because the sphere of market relations always relies on a background of non-contractual social relations.[95]

According to this analysis, formal education can be seen as a fictitious commodity because if we allowed for its regulation solely on the basis of the laws of supply and demand, this would severely undermine our social order. Schools play such an important role in social reproduction

[92] 'Positional goods' are goods whose value to a possessor "depends on other people's not possessing that good, or not possessing as much of it" (Reich, Rob. "Equality, adequacy, and K-12 education." *Education, justice, and democracy* (2013), p. 58.)
[93] Polanyi, Karl. *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time*. Beacon press, 2001, Chapter 6.
[94] Ibid, p. 76.
[95] Fraser, Nancy. "Can society be commodities all the way down? Post-Polanyian reflections on capitalist crisis." *Economy and Society* 43, no. 4 (2014): 541-558, p. 548.

that if education were exclusively a market good, not regulated through our conscious collective control, this would undermine the basis for capitalist production. I am not entirely convinced by the Polanyi-Fraser argument about the destabilizing effect this would have on capitalism itself, largely because the crises and contradictions many critics have been forewarning have not led to the dissolution of capitalism. Nevertheless, I take it that the full commodification of education would undermine democratic societies. It would mean that we were not collectively committed to and responsible for the development of all citizens, regardless of the morally arbitrary circumstances of their birth. It would also likely spell the end of universal education and the conception of education as a basic entitlement or right.

C. Fragmentation in Education

Fragmentation is the breaking up of a social practice into hierarchical subgroups. Fragmentation is prevalent in the major subsystems of contemporary societies, including healthcare and most other forms of caregiving, transportation, housing, etc. For example, a fragmented system of privatized health insurance divides people into distinct groups based on the type of insurance they have. Higher paying individuals get access priority and often higher quality care than those in lower paying plans. Fragmentation in education is particularly troubling. It sustains and amplifies fragmentation in all other subsystems, especially the family and economic production. The system of education in the US is hyper-fragmented: divided between the public and private, traditional and home schools, charter and traditional public schools, secular and religious schools, residential districts, and even tiered tracks within a single school. Hence, although all students are technically part of the same subsystem (viz., the system of education) they access a good (viz. education) that varies highly in quality as a result of no fault of their own.

Unlike alienation and commodification, fragmentation is a more visible pattern of social organization in education. It is readily apparent to all participants that the many existing kinds of schools in the US offer very different kinds of education. However, the function of fragmentation

in the social reproduction of class and race, as well as gendered nuclear family arrangements, has not been sufficiently acknowledged or analyzed. One might think that the widespread acceptance of division and tiers would at least appear inconsistent with a liberal democracy's commitment to equal concern for children as individuals. Yet, the logic of fragmentation is not only tolerated. In many cases, it is celebrated as a realization of liberal and democratic values. Parents' freedom and right to choose the place and manner in which their children are educated is invoked as a guiding normative commitment. Less often, some make the case that the present system gives educators – teachers and school administrators – more freedom to experiment and innovate. As for children, the blatant differences in the quality and scope of education they are afforded based on their family's race, wealth, and place of residence are masked by the appearance of universal provision and formal equality of opportunity. School is school, so the dominant narrative goes – once children are in, the smart, talented, hard-working ones have everything they need to succeed. From that point on, competition rewards the meritorious.

Of course the reality of U.S. education reveals that dominant narrative to be highly misleading at best. There are more than 128,000 schools in the U.S. – around 91,000 of which are traditional public schools, 8,000 charters, and 30,000 private schools.[96] Public schools are organized in autonomous administrative units called districts and in recent years districts have proliferated to over 13,000 across the country.[97] The details of funding schemes differ from one state to another, but in general at least half of each school district's budget comes from property taxes within the geographical area circumscribed by the district.[98] This unsurprisingly results in marked differences in spending per school and per pupil across districts, regions, and states, which have significant causal effects on student outcomes.[99] Yearly average per pupil expenditure in K-12 public schools ranges from a little over $10,000 a year in states like Idaho and Utah to over

[96] EducationWeek, "Education Statistics: Facts About American Schools" https://www.edweek.org/leadership/education-statistics-facts-about-american-schools/2019/01
[97] Ibid.
[98] For a detailed analysis of the school district system and the normative implications of its fragmentation, see Cynamon, Jeremy Kingston, and Sonia Maria Pavel. "The injustices of school district fragmentation." *Power and Education* 14, no. 3 (2022): 247-261.
[99] Jackson, C. Kirabo. *Does school spending matter? The new literature on an old question*. American Psychological Association, 2020.

$30,000 in New York and the District of Columbia. [100] Even the egalitarian core of the U.S. education system, the institutionalization of a commitment to universal provision of education through traditional public schools, is thus profoundly fragmented and as a result both procedurally and substantively unjust.

Fragmentation as a structural logic occurs when agents within a practice have the option to opt out of the already existing social relations and establish new ones with only a smaller, select group of participants. It is particularly pernicious when i) opting out is not in fact open to all participants; and ii) when a group of participants opting out reduces the quality of resources for the rest. Both are true in the case of educational fragmentation. In the case of school districts, it allows members of existing school districts who are currently pooling and redistributing resources and contributing to the shared project of educating their children to opt out of that community and start a new, more restricted one. In the name of free choice and individual liberty, this has resulted in the wealthier, more privileged, often predominantly White neighborhoods self-isolating. It *de facto* allowed the perpetuation of segregation that the Supreme Court rule *de jure* repealed through their landmark 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

To be clear, stating that a logic of fragmentation drives segregation in schools does not entail attributing the *desire* to fragment communities self-isolate along the lines of race, class, or ethnicity to any particular individuals. Although in some cases 'White flight' is consciously racially motivated, the logic of fragmentation emerges from the structural pressures on parents to maximize their own children's chances at getting ahead through education regardless of their intentions to self-segregate. As I explained earlier, education understood as a means to securing a certain socioeconomic status via a process of selection, ranking, and credentialing, is a zero-sum game that completely changes the behavior and choice architecture of the agents involved.

[100] National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). Public School Expenditures. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved Nov. 2023, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cmb.

The same logic is perpetuated when parents opt out of their district and apply for much-coveted spots in high-performing charter schools, spend their savings on elite private schools, or – in the most extreme form of fragmentation – resort to homeschooling.[101] But school choice is not the only layer of fragmentation, it is just the most visible. Public schools offer starkly different resources and possibilities for achievement. Some are obvious, such as the previously mentioned differences in per pupil expenditure. Others are more subtle. For example, only about a quarter of graduating high school seniors in the state of California are eligible to apply to public four-year universities in their state based on the number of approved college preparatory courses available in their high schools.[102]

In addition, the branches of individual schools and even classrooms themselves are fragmented, and consequently offer differential experiences and resources to students. One important form of fragmentation *within* schools is the practice of 'tracking' or dividing students into separate courses of study (e.g. vocational or academic) or different levels of ability in the same subject. The evidence clearly points to placement in differential ability-based tracks exacerbating background inequalities between students.[103] Higher degrees of school tracking have been shown to increase the effects of children's social origins and more specifically their parents' level of education.[104]

Schools also fragment students into different types of citizens. This is yet another form of 'tracking', this time into pathways of lawful citizenship or carceral subjectivity. Many studies have exposed the school-to-prison-pipeline, i.e. schools' adoption of a punitive and policing approach for maintaining discipline that disproportionately pushes low-income, non-White students out of

[101] For data on homeschooling, see National Center for Education Statistics, Homeschooling Fast Facts, https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=91.
[102] Shange, Savannah. *Progressive dystopia: Abolition, antiblackness, and schooling in San Francisco*. Duke University Press, 2019, p. 50.
[103] Terrin, Éder, and Moris Triventi. "The effect of school tracking on student achievement and inequality: A meta-analysis." *Review of Educational Research* 93, no. 2 (2023): 236-274.
[104] Reichelt, Malte, Matthias Collischon, and Andreas Eberl. "School tracking and its role in social reproduction: Reinforcing educational inheritance and the direct effects of social origin." *The British Journal of Sociology* 70, no. 4 (2019): 1323-1348.

educational institutions and into the juvenile justice system.[105] I propose that we are better off understanding the connections between schools and prisons as part of a broader logic of fragmentation of the polity into tracks of citizenship – the lawful and the outlaws, the trustworthy and untrustworthy.

Meira Levinson analyzes one dimension of this form of fragmentation through her concept of a 'civic empowerment gap', which refers to the significant disparities between the quantity and quality of civic education that non-White, poor students receive compared to their wealthy White counterparts in the United States. This gap refers not just to the teaching of civic education as a subject, but also to children's civic experiences in schools. Poor Black and Latino students disproportionately experience being viewed with suspicion, as "a potential threat to public safety and security" by their schools.[106] The regulation of their movement within schools, from strict rules for how to walk or dress to bathroom privileges, as well as the security screenings to even enter school premises, "prepare students experientially for de facto segregated citizenship".[107] The dual regime socializes poor Black and Hispanic students to be suspicious and mistrustful of authority, disengaged from political processes, and to lack a sense of political efficacy and empowerment.[108]

Oftentimes, progressive schools that explicitly try to oppose this tracking of students into different citizenship pathways end up reinforcing the fragmentation. Savannah Shange refers to this phenomenon as 'carceral progressivism', whereby the acknowledgment of systemic class and race-based injustices "serves as an alibi for the retrenchment of that very system".[109] While avoiding the zero-tolerance policies known for leading to students' suspension or even expulsion based on minor offences, these schools attempt to keep order by transferring out students who pose

[105] See, for example, Kim, Catherine Y., Daniel J. Losen, and Damon T. Hewitt. *The school-to-prison pipeline: Structuring legal reform*. NYU press, 2010; Mallett, Christopher A. "The school-to-prison pipeline: A critical review of the punitive paradigm shift." *Child and adolescent social work journal* 33 (2016): 15-24.
[106] Levinson, Meira. *No citizen left behind*. Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 176.
[107] Ibid, p. 179.
[108] Ibid, p. 180.
[109] Shange, p. 14.

discipline problems and vigorously maintaining the border between the protected schools space and the outside world. By trying to keep the students 'safe' from the communities many of them are part of, progressive low-income schools sometimes end up "calling on police violence to criminalize the border between the institution and the neighborhood".[110] In other words, they pursue the "twin investments in being a "school for social justice" and a "community" safe from "Outsiders"".[111]

Education is thus a national public system largely in name. In reality, the logic of fragmentation has created different educational tiers that offer separate and unequal schooling options. The possibility of opting out or choosing a different tier is open, but only to some. The most economically and socially privileged families, at least, have a number of ways to secure access to better educational resources and maximize the educational outcomes of their children. In the process, they further fragment the democratic communities they belong to – sharing fewer and fewer spaces and resources in common with people of different races and economic backgrounds and further undermining the already frail bonds of political solidarity and community.[112]

Moreover, the same exit options that perpetuate race and class hierarchies also less obviously perpetuate the larger subsystem of care that education and the family are a part of. The co-integration of the school and the family has bidirectional effects. Most theories that study the school-family nexus, including the critical approaches I analyzed in Chapter II, focus on the shaping of children's educational trajectories by their family background. But the set-up of schooling as a practice in turn enables the existence and perpetuation of the private, nuclear family and its unequal divisions of labor along gender lines. Especially in the U.S. context, schools take up only a share of the care labor involved in socializing children.[113] The unmet demand for

[110] Ibid, p. 136.
[111] Ibid, p. 135.
[112] Cynamon and Pavel 2022.
[113] Minimum school day laws vary by state - some states impose no lower required limit, while others require children to be in school for anywhere from a minimum of anywhere from 3 to 6.5 hours a day. See Pew Research Center, "In the U.S., 180 days of school is most common, but length of school day varies by state" https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/07/in-the-u-s-180-days-of-school-is-most-common-but-length-of-school-day-varies-by-state/.

afterschool programs that can ease the burden of care for parents, and especially mothers, is staggering. For every child in the U.S. enrolled in an afterschool program, there are three children waiting to get in.[114] Given that women still do the bulk of the caregiving for children in two-parent heteronormative families, schooling practices play an important role in the gendered division of labor in the family.[115]

Schools thus work in part by relying on the unpaid care work of parents in nuclear families. Critical theorists of education tend to pay particular attention to the transmission of cultural and social capital through the family and its shaping effects on children's performance in schools. But as feminist social and political theorists have pointed out, the emphasis on class background and education of family members tends to obscure the labor of *mothers* in shaping their children's school experiences.[116] This labor is part of a larger phenomenon of women's exploitation through the uneven burden of what Ann Ferguson calls "sex-affective production" – as the designated nurturers in our societies, women are required to engage in self-sacrifice to meet the needs for affection and care of children as well as adults.[117]

The idea of 'parental involvement' in education is thus a misnomer: we should talk instead about mothers' labor in managing and overseeing children's schooling.[118] From monitoring which classes and teachers their children have access to and advocating for more educational resources within the school to helping with homework and volunteering at the school, mothers in two-parent heterosexual couples tend to be in charge of children's education across class divides.[119] The transmission of cultural and social capital is thus not a passive inheritance, but an active process that relies on women's involvement in their children's educational experiences both at home and

[114] Alliance, Afterschool. "America after 3PM: Demand grows, opportunity shrinks." *Washington, DC: Afterschool Alliance* (2020).
[115] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "How Parents Used Their Time in 2021" https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2022/how-parents-used-their-time-in-2021.htm#:~:text=During%20their%20waking%20hours%20in,with%20children%20under%20age%206.
[116] See Lareau. Annette. "Gender Differences in Parent Involvement in Schooling" in *Education and Gender Equality*, ed. Julia Wrigley. Taylor & Francis, 2005.
[117] Ferguson, Ann. *Blood at the Root: Motherhood, Sexuality and Male Dominance*. Pandora Press, 1989.
[118] Lareau, p. 223.
[119] Ibid, p. 209-210.

in the school. It is therefore no coincidence that like most teachers, most parents who take up homeschooling are women – educational labor continues to be strongly gendered as feminine.[120]

Even in the best case scenario in which children of different class and race backgrounds attend the same school and benefit from other parents' involvement, the school performs its function by significantly relying on the private nuclear family. Given the fragmentation of the system of education and the intense competition for high-quality educational resources, ties of care and solidarity tend to be confined to the family. And, as Johanna Brenner puts it, "the more people must rely on family, the more they focus on increasing their individual resources and maximizing their own family fortunes and the less willing they are to support other people's families, other people's children".[121] Each mother takes care and advocates for her own children, rather than participating in a more communal experience of education. Investment of time and resources in one's own children becomes a zero-sum game and the individualism of parental strategies increases in proportion to the fragmentation of the school system. Thus, the educational system itself contributes to the privatization of families through their overwhelming reliance on parental support and management. If a good measure for solidarity in a community is how much people care about other people's children, then fragmentation is the greatest enemy of solidarity.[122] It structures our relations to engender caring for one's children at the detriment and expense of others' and to encourage solidarity in increasingly narrower, more restricted and homogenous, communities.

Resisting Alienation, Commodification, and Fragmentation

The critique of our education systems outlined in this chapter paints a dire picture. Not only are our social practices in the educational sphere unjust, they are also marred by social

[120] Lois, Jennifer. "Homeschooling motherhood." *The Wiley handbook of home education* (2021): 186-206; Lois, Jennifer. *Home is where the school is: The logic of homeschooling and the emotional labor of mothering*. NYU Press, 2013.
[121] Brenner, Johanna. "Socializing care: reinventing family life." *Towards a New Socialism* (2007), p. 2.
[122] Cynamon and Pavel 2022; paraphrasing Roberto Mangabeira Unger.

pathologies that prevent us from realizing important values via structural logics that individual agents are not in a position to change. Alienation prevents education from giving all students access to flourishing. Commodification distorts the possibilities for freedom and self-realization for students, teachers, and parents alike. Fragmentation prevents us from building the bonds of solidarity needed for collective, democratic self-determination, and further entrenches gender oppression in the family. These logics work behind the backs of agents who are rational and often well-intentioned – the teacher doing her duty by diligently grading her students, the parent enrolling their child in the best school they can afford, which happens to be predominantly White and affluent, and the principal trying to attract more funding for their school by raising exam scores.

But these critiques point the way to the positive ideals we should strive for. In the final chapter I outline a series of proposals for resisting alienation, commodification, and fragmentation. I argue that this requires reorienting our systems of education from equality of opportunity to access to flourishing, from commodification and alienation to an ideal of free, meaningful learning and work, and from the competition for individual success that drives fragmentation to a redistribution of education labor between the school, the family, and local communities. The analysis in this chapter offers yet another reason for hope: if schools represent the institutional domain where the family, the state, and production are co-integrated, then they are a particularly potent lever for change in all these realms.

Chapter IV
A New Program for Education

> Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.
> (Milton Friedman, 1982, p. ix)

Liberal theories of education aim to cultivate individual autonomy. Conservative theories aim at the intergenerational transmission and preservation of a cultural tradition. Democratic theories aim to form citizens with democratic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. While all three have their merits, they are either self-defeating or unattainable due to systematic failures of the social ontological frameworks underlying each theory. In different ways, these frameworks fail to account for the embeddedness and functioning of education within our broader social systems. I offered critical theory as a potential corrective for these social theoretical failures. I argued that while critical theories can provide a sobering picture of schools' role in social reproduction, their goals and prescriptions for education are nevertheless underdeveloped. This is no accident: for both methodological and normative reasons, many critical theorists refrain from extensively theorizing substantive goals, let alone their practical implementation.

But critical theory does rely on a normative vision of collective freedom, which is a precondition for individual freedom. Just like in the case of other theories, this aim follows from its social ontology. The critical approach I reconstructed embraces a Hegelian-Marxian conception of humans as self-creating beings, whose nature changes as they act to transform the world. Freedom consists precisely in the collective pursuit of transcendence, i.e. consciously creating and recreating our social relations and ourselves. The process of transcendence centrally involves *labor*, broadly understood as end-oriented purposive activity. The way we organize our material relations of production profoundly affects the ways of being available to us.

This conception of freedom is central to my own normative vision for education. However, I think freedom is only partially constitutive of a good human life. Human beings can be free without flourishing. Free and meaningful labor, which is what the critical conception of freedom amounts to, is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Full human development also entails other capabilities and ways of being in the world, including love and the imagination, that education must enable.[1] This conception of flourishing echoes the contours of an earlier *Bildung* tradition developed by Herder, Schiller, and Hegel, at the center of which is a conception of humanity – at both an individual and collective level – as a continuous task of self-critique and self-development.[2] Something would be lost, in my view, by grouping all of these capacities under the umbrella of 'freedom'.

In this chapter I build towards my own program for education by attempting to counter the logics of alienation, commodification, and fragmentation in pursuit of freedom and flourishing. The vision I propose is critical, pragmatist, and committed to deep democracy. It consists of both short-distance proposals aimed to be realistic in the present political landscape and longer-distance ones that would require more drastic accompanying changes in our social and political arrangements. Even the short-distance proposals, however, are meant to have potentially radical implications: apparently small policy reforms can contribute to a paradigm shift in our values and way of life.[3] I argue for four different kinds of interventions to change educational practices.

First, I defend an educational justice ideal of *fair access to development*, which I contrast with liberal fair equality of opportunity. The purpose of education, in my view, is to *form persons and citizens* in a democratic, solidaristic community, rather than ensure a fair competition for resources

[1] I am drawing on Vanessa Wills' interpretation of 'rich individuality' (Wills, Vanessa Christina. *Marx's Ethical Vision*. Oxford University Press, 2024, p. 117-140.)

[2] For a genealogy and reconstruction of the *Bildung* tradition, see Herdt, Jennifer A. *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition*. University of Chicago Press, 2019. Marx's concept of a 'rich individuality', which refers to the multilateral development of the capacities of every individual as a condition for the development of all, echoes the notion of Bildung (for an interpretation of 'rich individuality', see Wills, Vanessa Christina. *Marx's Ethical Vision*. Oxford University Press, 2024, p. 117-140).

[3] I therefore pursue what Roberto Unger calls 'revolutionary reform' (or 'non-reformist reform') - "the piecemeal and gradual, but potentially cumulative, reconstruction of some part of the basic structure of institutional arrangements and enacted beliefs?" (Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *False Necessity*: *Anti-necessitarian social theory in the service of radical democracy*. Cambridge University Press, 1987, p xxiv).

and opportunities. Realizing fair access to development requires de-fragmenting and de-commodifying the educational system through the distributive consolidation of school districts, as well as of public, charter, and private schools. This departs from progressive liberal egalitarian thinkers, who argue that the goals of cultivating autonomy and ensuring equality of opportunity are compatible with various forms of fragmentation and commodification in our system of education.

Second, I argue that we should pursue de-fragmentation efforts in education practices beyond formal schooling. In particular, we should reconfigure the co-integrated subsystems of the family and the school. I argue that meeting children's care needs requires both expanding the formal system of education to take on some of the burdens of the family, as well as redistributing care labor obligations in our kinship practices. Our present arrangements promote neither children's interest in receiving good care nor adults' interest in providing good care. Socializing or collectivizing care would lead not only to children's flourishing, but also to their caretakers', and especially women who continue to bear the brunt of social reproductive labor.

Third, I propose a series of changes in our educational practices to resist student alienation and reconfigure the school-production nexus. I articulate an ideal of free, meaningful work that has four prongs: *social value*, *power enhancement*, *conscious control*, and *self-realization*. I then argue that we should structure learning as a process of meaningful work. This entails reorienting our practices of assessment towards cultivating growth and intrinsic motivation, and away from ranking and extrinsic rewards such as grades. It also entails pursuing a curriculum that consciously aims to de-reify students' social and political imaginations. Beyond the intrinsic value of learning thus conceived, the long-term goal is to both motivate and equip students to pursue more just relations in their social, political, and economic practices. Surprisingly, this progressive goal has much in common with the conservative vision of education insofar as it entails passing on a particular cultural inheritance.

Finally, I articulate a set of educational reforms meant to expand our capacity for democratic self-governance. The approach draws on co-design, public narrative, and creative capacity building pedagogies. In contrast with traditional civic and citizenship education, it seeks to inform all other learning by putting social and political needs and problems at the center of the curriculum. Beyond curricula, democratizing education entails eliminating certain ways of exercising control and authority in the classroom. I explain why, contrary to some critical education theorists' views, this is compatible with teachers standing in hierarchical, authoritative relations to students. Ultimately, the vision for democratic education I propose is to make schools into democratic laboratories and loci of social learning, through which we collectively strive to remove social blockages and solve problems.

I. De-fragmentation and De-commodification – From Distributive to Developmental Justice

No child's quality of education should depend on the accident of their birth to parents who live on this or that side of a school district or state border. Decoupling the lottery of birth from what kinds of schools one gets to attend and with whom is only the first step to making education play a less prominent role in the reproduction of class and race. This means consciously reworking the system of education in a way that limits what are now understood as individual rights and freedoms of parents and other agents. The commitment to the development of all children is incompatible with the possibility of opting out of existing cooperative schemes of education by either fleeing to a smaller school district, a new charter or private school, or – in the most extreme form of opting out – homeschooling one's child. These cases of fragmentation undermine access to development in different ways: hoarding public resources, privatizing educational authority, and/or removing education from democratic deliberation. In other words, universal access to development is incompatible with educational fragmentation. While egalitarian liberals have proposed various ways of trying to make the educational system more equitable, these

cannot go far enough given the tension between existing individuals' rights and liberties and the development of future generations' autonomy.

More radical redistributive policies are particularly urgent in light of reactionary right-wing attempts to take the logic of fragmentation to its conclusion. The 'Project 2025' educational agenda, for example, consists of a series of proposals that amount to a dismantling of the public school system. One of their favored policies is the public funding of education through 'education savings accounts' (ESAs) that parents can use at their discretion to buy whatever educational services they see fit.[4] Arizona has implemented ESAs since 2011 by providing parents with 90% of the money the state would have spent on their child to use at their discretion on tuition, tutoring, or online courses. The idea underlying this move is that we can draw an equivalence between the value of attending school and the purchasing of 'educational services' in non-school settings by individual parents. For anyone who has thought about the relational and structural nature of education, this quantification is impossible. The plan is intentionally anti-redistributive, taking the logic of fragmentation and anti-solidarity that is currently dominant in our systems to an extreme. The next step in the progression would be to make ESAs means-tested and eventually not publicly supported at all, much like health insurance – every family educating their child however they want, based on their willingness and ability to pay.

Resisting the logics of fragmentation and commodification in the educational system cannot be effective without a reorientation from *equality of opportunity* – which involves reconfiguring access to educational resources so as to maximize the fairness of the educational competition – to an ideal of *access to development*.[5] I understand development or flourishing as the formation of a broad array of capabilities across the domains of work, citizenship, and personal

[4] Burke, Lindsay M., Ch. 11: Department of Education, *Mandate for Leadership: the Conservative Promise* (ed. Paul Dans, Steven Groves). The Heritage Foundation, 2023, p. 319-320.
[5] I draw here on Talha Syed's proposed distinction between 'opportunity to compete' and 'access to development', corresponding in his view to a 'meritocratic' and a 'democratic' conception of education, respectively (forthcoming).

relationships. I give an elaboration of this ideal in the following section. For now, it is important to note the key contrast with the dominant liberal conception of justice in education.

The aim of the liberal conception, even in its most progressive form of fair equality of opportunity, is ensuring a terrain of fair competition – for grades, awards, and admissions in elite institutions within the systems of education, and for high-paying, high-prestige positions in the market competition to follow. This is what the commitment to autonomy amounts to in practice under a capitalist regime of careers open to talents. The competition is fair if it eliminates any positional advantages and disadvantages "not traceable to talent or motivation".[6] As Talha Syed argues, this conception of education is *de facto* instrumental – educational opportunity serves the goal of the more talented getting ahead in life. Merit can and should justify fragmentation, in the liberal egalitarian picture. Even the most progressive advocates of liberal equality, such as Harry Brighouse, explicitly state that "children of different classes but the same level of natural talent should receive roughly equal educational resources" with the qualification that "more must be spent on the education of disabled students than on ordinarily-abled students".[7] The implication is that it is justified for those with 'lower levels of talent' to receive fewer resources (e.g. via tracking within schools, assignment to more/less competitive schools, etc.). Fragmentation is therefore built into the progressive liberal egalitarian picture as well, only it is justified by merit rather than parents' rights and liberties.[8]

The fragmentation associated with the equality of opportunity ideal is also fertile ground for commodification. If education is organized as a competition for resources, rather than as a political practice of care provision premised on our mutual interdependence and the common good, then the logic of the commodity form becomes fitting. Just like in the case of healthcare, as

[6] Syed, p. 24.
[7] Brighouse, Harry. *School choice and social justice*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2003, p. 138.
[8] As Leah Hunt-Hendrix and Astra Taylor put it, this is a more general anti-solidaristic orientation of progressive liberals who pursue fragmentation by "ranking and sorting: deserving versus undeserving, worthy versus unworthy, those with merit versus those without—classifications that impede solidarity by making it appear as though those who inhabit society's upper echelons are entitled to be there, and that those at the bottom have also earned their fate." (Hunt-Hendrix, Leah, and Astra Taylor. *Solidarity: The past, Present, and future of a world-changing idea*. Pantheon, 2024, p. 118.)

soon as health is not seen as an entitlement or basic need that is our responsibility to provide as a political community, the market of consumers and providers can substitute political deliberation with standards of economic efficiency. Business management strategies to maximize profit, whether understood as surplus value or human capital, replace democratic self-governance and the attempt to realize our goals and values for education. They also distort the relational aspects of education as a form of care. As I argued in my critique of liberal theories of education, the autonomy ideal does not have sufficient substance on its own and is cannibalized under present circumstances by the capitalist logic of commodification.

The ideal of access to development, by contrast, is one that sees education as inherently valuable insofar as it consists in "forming persons and citizens".[9] We can understand development on the nineteenth century model of *Bildung* as the formation of the intellectual, physical, ethical, and political "capacities of the individual into a harmonious whole".[10] The distributive ideal that guides education policy in this developmental framework is not fair competition, but fair universal access to development. Organizing the education system meritocratically, at least as merit is understood in the dominant careers-open-to-talents conception, is incompatible with this goal.

Consider the case of "average" students, those who are deemed either less talented or less motivated to work hard by our system of education – but are not considered 'disabled'. Fair equality of opportunity answers this question in a manner that should be concerning to all who care about education justice:

> ["average" students] will of course have available the same formal resources and hence "chance to succeed" as every other student, but equally of course they will not score as high or, crucially, develop as well—and this not merely an implied aspect of the ideal, but its anticipated outcome, indeed its intended aim. The ideal's entire point is to institute a truly fair system of academic competition, where those with the most ability and willingness to work hard "rise to the top."[11]

[9] Ibid, p. 13.
[10] Herdt, p. 114.
[11] Syed, p. 24.

This vision misses that both talent and motivation are not intrinsic properties of individual students, but endogenous to educational processes. The quantity and quality of pedagogical resources that a student receives affects their perceived talent and motivation.[12] This makes differentiation on the basis of talent and motivation in schools, under the principle of educational merit, incoherent and ultimately deeply unjust.

So long as education is structured as a competition for positional goods, individual actors and groups will operate under strong incentives to gain a competitive advantage in this merit-based competition. The logic of fragmentation is thus a rational response of individual agents entering an educational arms race in a system governed by the ideal of equal opportunity. The generalized desire to gain access to the best possible educational institutions and highest quality educational resources leads to a never-ending tiering of the educational system. Parents seek to boost their children's life chances in this competition by giving them access to the most exclusive educational service. Educational institutions both respond to and shape this demand. Elite private preparatory academies compete with the most competitive charter schools, who in turn try to gain a competitive advantage over the best traditional public schools in each district. The tiering also happens within schools. Endless opportunities to distinguish oneself from one's peers exist, not just through competitions for grades and awards, but through schools-within-schools fragmentation: tracking, Advanced Placement, honors programs, dual enrollment, etc.

This means that any serious defragmentation efforts require, at least temporarily, interfering with the current scheme of rights and liberties of parents and other individuals. The liberal commitment to respecting parent's realization of their own conceptions of the good by bestowing advantages and securing education as a positional good for their children cannot be prioritized under a conception of developmental justice. Nor can we prioritize the liberties of educational entrepreneurs and investors seeking to profit from the commodification of education.

[12] Ibid, p. 26.

But my proposal is not to leave the system of education as it is currently organized and simply curtail parents' individual rights and liberties. As I see it, under a unified system of education organized around the aim of access to development, the structural incentives that currently feed the educational arms race between parents will wither away.

As many liberal egalitarians have argued, we should not assume that parents' rights are fundamental or absolute. There are very good reasons why justice considerations trump them in many contexts.[13] While I agree with this position, I believe that framing the policy debate as between choice-favorable and anti-choice visions, as has been the case in the past few decades of philosophy of education, obscures more than it illuminates. Choice under a regime of equality of opportunity, which accepts that some students will have a better education in an allegedly justified manner, by virtue of merit, departs from the ideal of universal fair access to development I just introduced. On the other hand, a non-fragmented system of education could have opportunities for parental choice, but they would be of a different quality and with very different distributive repercussions than in our current system. For example, districts across the country have practiced controlled public-school choice to some success in ensuring fair access to development across race and class.[14]

Finally, a fundamental difference between my account and that of liberal egalitarians is that the ideal of fair access to development relies on the anti-individualist orientation to both social ontology and normative theory I outlined in previous chapters. The flourishing of individuals as persons and citizens constitutively depends on the realization of certain structural conditions of democracy and solidarity. Liberal theorists, by contrast, tend to argue that so long as education promotes autonomy, we need not be concerned with its nature as a commodity or a public good, or with its role in building solidarity and a sense of community. Harry Brighouse, for example,

[13] For a compelling argument on the limits that a liberal conception of education justice imposes on parental rights, see Brighouse, 2003, especially p. 17, p. 83-89.
[14] Wasow, Bernard and Richard D. Kahlenberg. "What Makes Schools Work? Why private-school tuition vouchers are not the answer", *Boston Review*, October 1, 2003.

argues that preserving democracy, advancing the common good, and resisting commodification are either irrelevant or merely subsidiary concerns in education justice.[15] This is because the status of autonomous moral agents is taken to be an individual achievement that does not depend on specific social arrangements. As I argued in the first chapter, failing to recognize the social preconditions of freedom is a central flaw of the liberal approach. Part of my goal in this chapter is to spell out the preconditions of freedom, starting with de-fragmentation.

So what does de-fragmentation entail in practice? The organization of our education systems has two fundamental dimensions: i) the governance of educational practices; and ii) the distribution of funding and access to education. The two are sometimes conflated – it is assumed that consolidating school districts as distribution pools necessarily entails consolidating control over educational practices. My proposal resists this conflation and combines a maximally redistributive policy of funding schools with highly localized democratic control and decision-making power within schools and district areas. In the U.S., this would mean that state governments and the federal government in particular would have a bigger role in pooling funding for schools via taxes and then redistributing them at state and national level. However, this would be accompanied by school governance being subject to more forms of local democratic decision-making, rather than an increased role for state and federal-level bureaucrats and elected representatives.

The logic of fragmentation I described in the previous chapter points to the fact that our school systems must be reorganized to eliminate the tiered nature of education and ensure a truly universal and unified scheme for education at the level of nation-states. The U.S. system of education, which has been my focus in terms of illustrations and case studies, is a case of hyperfragmentation, but this tendency is globally present and constantly growing. This is why I

[15] Brighouse 2003, p. 47-64.

focus here on some policy proposals for the U.S. system, with implications for other states currently experiencing or starting to experience and unfolding logic of fragmentation.

First, the policy of school funding via districts, the autonomous regional units that pool funding from local property taxes, must be rethought. Existing class and race segregation in housing has resulted in a *de facto* segregated system of education, with wealthy, predominantly White districts offering children a much higher quality education by only redistributing resources (mainly property taxes) in their own district pools. The existence of school districts has been a major barrier in the way of *Brown v. Board of Education* achieving its goal of desegregation. Moreover, the increasing fragmentation of districts has been a central vehicle for further segregation in the post-legal segregation era. Districts sustain inequality at all levels – within the same city as well as between cities, regions, and states.

The most effective way of resisting these inequalities would be to consolidate school funding at all of these levels, in effect eliminating school districts as distributive units. Present structural incentives for splintering school districts, White flight, and self-segregation would be significantly reduced by the enlargement of redistributive pools. Removing school district boundaries and redrawing school enrollment could also dramatically reduce class and race segregation by reassigning some students to different schools. This would help advance fair universal access to development while removing some of the inefficiencies of our present system. For example, a recent study shows that redrawing attendance boundaries in 98 U.S. school districts would not only reduce segregation but also cut down average travel times for students.[16]

The source of school funding should also be rethought. Whether local property taxes are still employed as a major source to fund education or not, there should be a single federal pool of tax collection and redistribution for education. Given disparities among U.S. states, the federal government should then subsidize poorer states' funding pools to achieve the levels of the states

[16] Gillani, Nabeel, Doug Beeferman, Christine Vega-Pourheydarian, Cassandra Overney, Pascal Van Hentenryck, and Deb Roy. "Redrawing attendance boundaries to promote racial and ethnic diversity in elementary schools." *Educational Researcher* (2023).

with the highest per pupil spending. To avoid worries about leveling down in the name of an abstract ideal of equality, education policymakers should determine the average costs of schooling in each state with a view to a maximal threshold based on the highest performing schools by existing metrics. Annual per pupil spending should be brought up for most states, taking into account regional factors impacting costs of running a school. Where costs are lower because of lower teacher salaries and wages, the trend should similarly be to raise them rather than level down.

Of course, these reforms do not assume our resources are infinite. We will still have to make comparative judgments of priority. The method for determining access priority I favor is Talha Syed's principle of proportionate priority, which integrates considerations of comparative priority for students at lower levels of development with their comparative potential to make progress using these resources.[17] There is also reason to believe that the overall resource pool would be increased by de-fragmentation efforts. The consolidation of school districts would itself be a source of increased funding, as some of the administrative costs of operating the colossal number of small school districts would be reduced.[18] I agree with right-wing critics about the relative inefficiency of our present system, but argue that reducing district-level, rather than federal-level bureaucracy, should be our target. Another way of raising educational budgets at the U.S. federal level, some progressive thinkers have suggested, is through the implementation of a comprehensive flat-rate value-added tax (VAT). While regressive in the short-run, it would raise the tax yield significantly and if used towards democratizing educational spending, would have radical progressive effects in the long-run.[19]

The second prong of a strategy to resist fragmentation would be to gradually eliminate the tiered system of public and charter schooling. Charters are another means for perpetuating race and class segregation in the U.S. under the justification of experimentation, autonomy, and

[17] Syed, forthcoming, p. 10.
[18] See, for example, Duncombe, William, and John Yinger. "Does school district consolidation cut costs?." *Education Finance and Policy* 2, no. 4 (2007): 341-375.
[19] Unger, Roberto Mangabeira. *The left alternative*. Verso Books, 2020, p. 119-120.

innovation. As I explain in later sections, I believe we should retain the spirit of innovation and experimentation without creating a distinct tier of schools that appear procedurally open but are in fact riddled with obstacles that track race and class. The reality of charter schools in fact falls significantly short of the ideal of experimentation and innovation. Charters have primarily served as an emergency rescue boat for more privileged children from underfunded, underserved public school districts. Their educational methods and curricula have been far from innovative and have generally focused on increased quality of college preparation and career readiness.[20] Given the background of consolidating school funding and redistribution, the structural incentives for privileged parents to remove their children from the public school system would naturally lose some of their force. As for the ideal of autonomy and innovation, what I am in effect proposing is that public schools could be given more autonomy in governance (the current alleged benefit of charter schools) without fragmenting or differentiating themselves in terms of status from the traditional public school system.

Third, a long-term goal should be significant reduction and eventual abolition of private schools, i.e. institutions that charge tuition to provide educational goods and services to families who remove their children from public schools. This does not entail that private entities and organizations can no longer be involved in managing and operating individual schools, but they should no longer be allowed to do so by charging tuition for individual pupils while enjoying tax-exempt status. Instead, they are to be integrated into the same redistributive pool of school funding as others. Given the entrenchment of the public/private divide in the U.S. and elsewhere, this change should be enacted gradually, by means of intermediate stages. One of the stages might be the charging of increasingly high taxes on private school tuition, so as to make opting out of the public system of education a rare and costly 'luxury'.[21] These taxes would be used to fund the

[20] I have written extensively about the injustices of charters here: Cynamon, Jeremy Kingston, and Sonia Maria Pavel. "Revoke the Charters: A Critical Reevaluation of Charter Schools." *Polity* 56, no. 1 (2024): 163-186.

[21] This type of policy proposal has been discussed and proposed in various forms in the United Kingdom. Some progressives have proposed imposing value-added taxes on public school fees and using the proceeds in a redistributive manner – by e.g. creating a mobility fund for underprivileged students or free school meals for all children (see, e.g. "Labour plans could see steep rise in

public system of education and could eventually reach a level of 100% of tuition, i.e. every family paying tuition for their child to attend a private school would in effect be subsidizing another child's education in the public system. Another step would be to create public-private partnerships for school management and operation funded by hybrid public and private sources. However, no school should be given as much leeway and operational autonomy with no public oversight as some private educational entities, including some religious organizations running schools in the U.S., currently have.

Fourth, the most dramatic form of fragmentation present in contemporary educational systems and growing at a fast rate in the U.S., homeschooling, ought to be dramatically diminished and eventually abolished. Removing one's children from the traditional public school system in order to educate them in the home represents more than just an opting out of the school system. It is a way of exiting the project of educating children communally altogether.[22] As a result, regardless of individual homeschooling parents' intentions, it further undermines solidarity and a sense of the common good. As I explain in the next section, we should reconfigure the family-school nexus in the opposite direction from homeschooling, reducing the burdens of private nuclear families, especially mothers. Rather than making each set of parents responsible for pursuing the educational and professional interest of their own children, with a competitive orientation towards other families and their children, we should make all parents (and non-parents) more responsible for the flourishing and education of children who are not 'their own'.

II. Reconfiguring the school-family nexus

The previous section focused on the structure and organization of the school system as an independent sub-system of society. This is the focus of most liberal egalitarian distributive reforms.

private school fees" (FT, November 2023) or for earlier proposals "Jeremy Corbyn champions universal benefits with free school meals policy" (The Guardian, April 2017), "How to fund a real pupil premium" (The Fabian Review, Winter 2010/11)).

[22] In a co-authored piece with Jeremy Kingston Cynamon, "Your Home Is Not a School: The Inconsistencies of Homeschooling as a Political Practice" (*Politics, Philosophy and Economics*, 2025), we argue that education confined exclusively to the family unit does not meet the goals of modern schooling as defined in either a liberal, conservative, democratic, or critical framework.

But as the previous chapter argued, education is a mediating domain between the family on one hand and production on the other. In this section I expand on the idea of reconfiguring the school-family nexus to meet our needs to both give and receive care. I argue that reimagining the nexus of care responsibilities would have effects not only on children's flourishing and the equity of the school system, but also increase the quality of life of parents and other community members.

The school system is both shaped by and contributes to shaping our family practices. The contemporary two-parent nuclear family in which both parents can work full-time is in part made possible by a common educational system that takes responsibility for some of the educational and care work for children. On the other hand, a common school system that only takes care of children's education for about six hours a day is made possible by a significant investment of time and energy from families. In other words, the division of educational labor between the school and the family is a very particular one that tends to not be the subject of much political or philosophical scrutiny or conscious reevaluation. I argue that this division of labor, and importantly the boundaries between the educational domain of the private family and that of the school, should be a major dimension of any progressive program for education.

As I argued in my critique of the liberal ideal of equality of opportunity, part of what stifles liberal frameworks' pursuit for justice is respect for 'the family' and 'family values'. These discussions often assume that our contemporary ways of organizing care arrangements and the family are either natural or to some extent inevitable, as well as good. Liberals and conservatives alike have claimed the mantle of protecting or honoring 'family values'. For example, much of the groundwork of motivating an extensive regime of parental rights over education, which I argued is in tension with the cultivation of children's freedom, is done by appeal to parents' love for their children and the value of a sphere of parental discretion over raising children. The opportunity to shape children in accordance with their own values is an important part of parents' conception of the good. Rhetorically, this move makes any attempt to undermine 'parents' rights' fraught and likely to be met with skepticism.

But such appeals to 'the family' conflate what is of value in our present family relationships (good care, love, intimacy, etc.) with preserving the shape our family relations currently assume. The normative balance for liberal political philosophers is between intervention by the state into the family to protect children's autonomy and "respect for the integrity of the family", which refers to parents' discretion over how to raise their children.[23] Hence the argument of the most egalitarian and progressive liberals that we cannot equalize children's opportunities lest we unjustifiably interfere with parents' liberty to achieve unequal outcomes.[24] As Brighouse and Swift conclude, pursuing fair equality of opportunity all the way "would cost too much in terms of familial relationship goods".[25]

What are these relationship goods, in the liberal view? And what does securing them require? The idea that children should be raised by a small number of parents in nuclear families is supported in many liberal accounts on the basis of children's interest in development – moral, physical, and cognitive. Brighouse and Swift, for example, argue that these developmental goods can be secured "only when authority […] and care for a child are concentrated in a small number of adults".[26] This is why the nuclear family is in their view superior to communes, kibbutzim, or state-sponsored orphanages. Children need to develop long-term loving, trusting relationships with a small number of adults who know them and their needs very well and who have significant discretionary authority over them.[27]

This means, according to Brighouse and Swift, that parents need a robust sphere of spontaneous action and discretion in their relationships with children, even when this sphere is in tension with fair equality of opportunity. As they put it, some of the parental freedoms necessary for securing distinctive relationship goods for children will result in unfair competitive advantages for children. Their conclusion is that we should "reform the social environment – to decouple the

[23] Brighouse, Harry, and Adam Swift. *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships*. Princeton University Press, 2014.
[24] Ibid, p. 36.
[25] Ibid, p. 44.
[26] Ibid, p. 71.
[27] Ibid, p. 72-75.

interactions productive of our core familial relationship goods from the competitive advantage to which those interactions may give rise".[28] For example, the state should pursue poverty reduction policies to make sure poorer parents have the same opportunities to secure goods for their children as others.

I take many of these claims to be unobjectionable. Of course, loving relationships cannot be generalized among large numbers of children and adults without losing their particular character. And it would be difficult to coordinate care if no adults had at least comparatively more authority over each child's education than any others. However, this does not come anywhere near a full-fledged defense of our present caregiving arrangements in the family. Much like many liberal political philosophers, Brighouse and Swift do not pay any close attention to the distinctions between different types of reproductive and care labor, their gendered and oppressive nature in our present society, or our ability to consciously disaggregate them. A child having intense, intimate, loving parenting relationships with a small number of adults does not entail, at least without significant argumentation, that those same adults should be in charge of cleaning floors, washing and buying clothes, preparing meals, and securing shelter for the child.

This broader analysis of social reproduction is not an oversight. It stems from the same difficulties that liberal social theory has accounting for the social preconditions of autonomy. The more specific mistake is that the family in its present form is justified by appeal to goods it is only able to secure for some children and parents at the expense of others. The analysis fails to fully consider how the family structure itself, with its privatization and concentration of caregiving burdens in the hands of individual parents, and especially mothers, is part of the "social environment" that perpetuates the very injustices that egalitarians abhor. Wealthy, often White women, are able to pursue careers and develop healthy emotional bonds with their children, often

[28] Brighouse & Swift, p. 143. As they bluntly state, "familial relationship goods are more important than fair equality of opportunity".

by relying on the labor of poor women of color who struggle to meet their own children's basic needs.

These arguments assume that familial relationship goods are specific to the family in its present form or even exclusive, not multiply realizable through alternative care arrangements. This reification of the family ends up stifling the progressive potential of liberal educational goals, including cultivating autonomy and equality of opportunity. To be sure, there are exceptions. Feminist scholars like Anca Gheaus have made arguments for resisting the unjust gendered division of care labor in contemporary families through proposals such as compensating women who disproportionately shoulder caregiving burdens and diversifying children's caretakers beyond their parents.[29] But as Gheaus herself points out, there are limits to what kinds of interventions the liberal state can make to interfere with autonomous adults who endorse traditional gender norms or divisions of labor.[30]

Reflecting on my own primary and secondary schooling years, much of my learning and 'school work' took place in my family. I learned how to read and write before going to school and came to understand and internalize many of the lessons I had encountered in the classroom at home, with my parents and grandparents patiently explaining and unpacking the material for me. My late grandfather kept a notebook of the math problems that I had trouble solving over the years. I would call him with the question and he would solve the problem in his notebook, calibrate the solutions he would come up with to my middle- or high-school level of comprehension, and call me back to explain. But he couldn't have done this without my late grandmother preparing every single one of their meals, cleaning, and managing their household. My school 'results', from grades to competitions and awards, were the complex result of a web of social relations between my teachers and my family members. I was among the lucky children – the interactions between

[29] See Gheaus, Anca. "Political liberalism and the dismantling of the gendered division of labor." *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy Volume 9* 9 (2023): 153; Gheaus, Anca. "Arguments for nonparental care for children." *Social Theory and Practice* 37, no. 3 (2011): 483-509.
[30] Gheaus 2023, p. 32 [online pdf].

my school and my family positioned me in a most favorable position to learn and develop certain abilities, with time, energy, individualized attention and resources devoted to my education. I did not realize until later that some students' families could not help them to the same extent – whether because they were working long hours or because they themselves did not have the requisite knowledge and abilities. I also realized that others had private tutors in all school subjects by the time they entered middle school.

Whether all children enjoy care, support, and resources should obviously not be a matter of luck. But the progressive impulse towards redistribution of resources in the formal education system is not enough to ensure this given current arrangement of schools and families. Even if children of very different backgrounds end up going to the same school together, as was the case in my Bucharest public school, they will not and cannot have similar opportunities as long as nothing changes on the family side of the nexus. In other words, the de-fragmentation specified in the previous section could take place without eliminating the further forms of fragmentation between families. A more radical refashioning of the structure of social relations is necessary.

An initial way in which the school-family nexus could be reconfigured would be offering much more extensive and better funded institutionalized public education. Daycare, kindergarten, pre-school, as well as after-school programs should all be publicly available, and tuition-free, as well as significantly extended to cover more hours per day and more days of the week. This is already the case in Nordic countries, where children of pre-school age can attend full- or part-time daycare institutions, with Norway, Denmark, and Finland providing cash allowances for parents who choose to look after their children in their own homes.[31] Daycare option are also available for children of school age, from youth centers to after-school clubs.[32]

However, we should pursue these policies of state-funded childcare with the recognition that they are not all created equal. Some distributive interventions meant to ensure equity in early

[31] Editorial group for NOSOSCOS welfare statistics, "Early childhood education and care", https://nhwstat.org/welfare/families-and-children/early-childhood-education-and-care
[32] Ibid.

childhood development are ineffective. As Michael Merry has argued, many early childhood education initiatives demonstrate "negligible added value to the development of young children", especially in the absence of proper professional training for educators or more thoughtful conceptualizations of development and developmental aims.[33] For example, understaffed care centers or poorly trained staff often provide children with disabilities much worse care than their own parents. We should therefore not only ensure its provision, but be careful about the quality and nature of care. A constant threat to the ideal of development broadly understood is the logic of commodification. Early childhood education, even in countries where it is provided by governments in public daycares and kindergartens, has been shaped by economic imperatives. Kindergarten educators in Norway, for example, have organized under the banner of *Barnehageopprøret* or "kindergarten rebellion" starting in 2016 to protest the newly proposed standardized evaluation of language and school-readiness in kindergartens. The new standards, they argued, reduced children's well-being, sacrificing the goods of childhood and the value of play in pursuit of human capital. They also undermined educators' expertise, freedom, and capacity to adapt spontaneously to children's needs.[34]

Yet another class of public policies meant to support childcare ends up reinforcing the structural inequalities of the status quo. Cash allowances can be a way of maintaining present oppressive gendered childcare arrangements in place. For example, the Finnish Child Home Care Allowance, a benefit to parents who choose to care for their children at home, has reinforced various gendered educational and job market inequalities, as mothers are the ones who most often choose to stay home with the child.[35] More importantly, such programs reinforce the fragmentation of care and education as the responsibility of individual mothers or nuclear families, and therefore a private, depoliticized affair.

[33] Merry, Michael S. *Educational justice: Liberal ideals, persistent inequality and the constructive uses of critique*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 39.
[34] Vandenbroeck, Michel, Joanne Lehrer, and Linda Mitchell. *The decommodification of early childhood education and care: Resisting neoliberalism*. Routledge, 2023, p. 70-75.
[35] Ibid, p. 18.

To avoid keeping the rigid boundaries of the private family and the public school intact, we must go beyond this in providing parents and other community members with expanded opportunities and resources for involvement in educational and care work in the school. In the U.S., volunteer programs for parents already exist in many schools. But they are limited to the time that children spend in school and there are significant barriers to parents' involvement depending on economic status, which affects their ability to dedicate free time to such activities. What we need is a set of institutionalized, publicly funded ways in which parents, family members, as well as other adult members of our communities can become involved in education, and more broadly care work, and be compensated for it.

Imagine if instead of me being on the phone with my grandpa for a few hours and being the sole beneficiary of his knowledge and teaching abilities, he was involved in teaching math classes or running an afterschool math club at my school. Such involvement should be compensated by the state and made available to parents who work full time. In his program for education, Philip Kitcher makes a proposal for fully state subsidized cooperative centers of "Care, play, and instruction" for infants and children who have not yet started school in which parents receive "paid release from their regular work" to spend a couple of days a week taking care of children.[36] These centers would improve upon existing initiatives by having a higher ratio of adults to children, including non-teacher 'adult assistants' (parents and other community members) in all classrooms. This would allow for more individualized care and attention that children need to discover their passions and develop their capabilities, in addition to giving more adults the opportunity for fulfillment that involvement in children's education provides.[37]

But if we are to resist the structural forms of fragmentation, our reforms, however radical, cannot stop within the school or within the formal educational system. Part of my emphasis in critiquing other approaches' social theories has been on the co-integration of the school, the family,

[36] Kitcher, Philip. *The main enterprise of the world: Rethinking education*. Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 76.
[37] Ibid, p. 77, 113-114.

and production. Educational injustice is part of a broader crisis of care and social reproductive labor. Women shoulder a disproportionate burden in caring for and meeting the needs of others and this uncompensated reproductive labor is a background condition of possibility for all of our productive activity. In their visions of making our caring arrangements more just and democratic, Ann Ferguson and Deborah Stone have proposed demanding caregivers' *right* to be able to *give* care, i.e. providing them with the time and material resources to do so in a dignified manner both within the family and outside of it.[38]

We should include the right to contribute to one's community through involvement in children's education within the feminist demand of a right to care. Crucially, the right to give care, funded by the political community, should be available *to parents and non-parents alike*. We should recognize that caring for other human beings is an important part of human flourishing and falls within the category of meaningful work I will propose in the following section. Expanding caring relationships and diversifying caretakers in this way would not only ease this burden for women but contribute to the flourishing of children and other adults. Beyond redistributive benefits and ensuring better care for all children, expanding caring communities would also socialize agents into more egalitarian dispositions oriented towards solidarity and reciprocity, as opposed to individualism and competition.[39]

In light of this analysis, we should move in the direction of making the boundary between the school and the family more permeable. However, we should do so not only with the aim of increasing opportunities for personal autonomy and fulfillment for individual children and parents, but also in order to resist the social pathology of fragmentation, including through gendered family arrangements. The fragmentation inherent in our current school-family arrangements is central to the reproduction of race and class. As Michael Merry puts it, "the transfer of social capital that

[38] Ferguson, Ann. "Socialist Feminism and the Right to Care". *Towards a New Socialism* (2007); Stone, Deborah. "Why we need a care movement." *Nation* 270, no. 10 (2000): 13-15.
[39] Brenner, Johanna. "Socializing care: reinventing family life." *Towards a New Socialism* (2007), p. 7-9. Brenner also shows how some of the "conflicts around autonomy/separation and dependence/merger" that both parents and children experience in our highly privatized and nuclear family arrangement would be mitigated by more collective and democratic community living (p. 8).

matters most" to educational development as well as for competitive advantage takes place in the family.[40]

Critical theorists of education should find inspiration in the socialist feminist tradition, which has long argued for socializing care and reconfiguring the boundaries of the family. More than a century ago, Alexandra Kollontai proposed a vision of collectivization of both housework and childcare meant to relieve women's burden in individual nuclear households by making cleaning, cooking, and caring after dependents the responsibility of our political community.[41] Her proposals include public restaurants and communal kitchens, state-sponsored cleaning services, centralized laundries, as well as maternity homes and nurseries, public playgrounds and care centers.[42] In the early days of the Soviet Union, a series of communal living arrangements were implemented (e.g. the Narkomfin Communal House in Moscow), but they were insufficiently supported by the state to begin with, before falling out of favor completely. [43] Similar experiments, albeit much more grassroots and with no support from the state, appeared in the United States, but the lack of structural support and infrastructure meant that they were short-lived.[44]

Part of what is involved in making the family-school nexus more conducive to everyone's flourishing is rebalancing commitments and attachments to be less exclusive, unilateral, and fragmented. Huge care deficits and inequitable divisions of labor arise from having the private nuclear family be the primary or sole way of arranging care for children. Parents, and in particular mothers, are consumed with the work of providing for their children's needs because in many cases there are no "meaningful others" on whom they can rely to share responsibilities. If one is not in the fortunate position of having extended family or a broader community that voluntarily

[40] Merry, *Educational Justice*, p. 47 (fn 36).
[41] Kollontai, Alexandra. *Selected Writings*. Alison & Busby, London, 1977.
[42] Ibid, p. 254-258.
[43] For a history of the early Soviet collectivization and co-operative living experiments, see Hester, Helen, and Nick Srnicek. *After work: a history of the home and the fight for free time*. Verso Books, 2023, p. 99-103.
[44] See, for example, the Ansonia and the Finnish Women's Co-Operative Home (Hester & Srnicek, p. 105) and the countercultural communes in the 1960s – from Drop City to lesbian separatist communes (p. 119-127).

self-organizes to make childcare more communal, there are currently no public avenues to "expand the relationships that children have with adults who care for and about them".[45]

The end goal in offering such public venues would not be to force people to renounce their particularized family commitments in favor of a collectivization imposed from above. Instead, we would aim to balance our needs for intimate, particular attachments with the clear need for more just care relations for both children and their caretakers by both providing public, high-quality universal childcare and recognizing communal ways of arranging care beyond the nuclear family. The latter would include rethinking child custody laws and child benefits to apply beyond the restricted arrangements we now call 'the family'.[46]

The reconfiguration of the school-family nexus would not only benefit children, but significantly reduce the burdens on their caretakers. Liberal discourse often emphasizes that shaping one's children is a matter of *parents' rights*. But under present conditions, taking control and responsibility for one's child educational opportunities is not the exercise of a right, but an inescapable and burdensome obligation. Parents in advanced liberal democracies *have no choice* but to devote much of their lives to the education and shaping of their children, within the parameters and constraints of their social and economic means. This obligation is made all the more strenuous and taxing by the educational arms race created by a competitive, fragmented system. As I explained in the third chapter, the work of researching educational options and exercising one's right to "school choice" is gendered, as well as differentially accessible along race and class lines. Working-class parents and low-income families of color are often blamed for not being "good parents" because they do not have the time or resources to maximize their children's opportunities to compete in the system of education. A structural background of class hierarchy is conceptualized, under the dominant ideal of equality of opportunity, as a matter of whether individual families care about their children's education or not. Changing kinship arrangements to

[45] Brenner 2007, p. 8.
[46] Hester & Srnicek, p. 142-143.

more equitably distribute care burdens should therefore be seen not as an attack on the family and parents' ability to shape their children, but as a way of enabling the realization of these values.

III. Resisting Alienation

Part of my task in this chapter is outlining the changes we need to make in our education system to correspond to a particular substantive conception of the human – namely, as historical and social beings whose freedom consists in collectively shaping their practices and their own nature. In this section I start painting a broader picture of what ensuring *access to development* for all students entails in light of the critical conception of human beings. An education that prioritizes the full development and flourishing of all must go beyond preparing the majority of students primarily to make a living under present social and economic circumstances. It must instead aim towards flourishing, understood in terms of a broad range of meaningful experiences in central domains of human life: work, political participation, personal relationships, aesthetic experiences, and relation to non-human life. A school system embedded in a society where these domains are marred by social pathologies should give students the capacities to desire, imagine, and build a different world.

A helpful way of understanding the goal of flourishing is provided by the capabilities approach, especially the idea that there is a distinctly human way of using our perception and reasoning capacities.[47] The human capability that critical social ontologies tend to center is work. 'Work' is any end-oriented activity that in some way transforms the external world – whether in concrete ways, such as building a chair, or less concrete ones, such as developing a concept or a theory. Nussbaum includes the capability "to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers" under the

[47] I am drawing here on Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's approach to human development and freedom in terms of 'capabilities.' Capabilities are substantive freedoms to achieve 'functionings' (states of doing or being) that one has reason to value. Examples of functionings in this paradigm include being adequately nourished, being safe, having a nurturing family, being educated, participating in economic production and in political life, etc. while capabilities represent the real opportunities one has to achieve these functionings (See, e.g. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford Paperbacks, 2001, p. 74).

basic capability of affiliation, more specifically as one of the social bases of self-respect.[48] But I understand work more broadly, as one of the definitive human capabilities beyond the need for affiliation, as well as more specifically, as having certain substantive normative features. In the following subsection, I argue there are four features that define freeing, meaningful work in contradistinction to alienated work: *social value*, *power enhancement*, *conscious control*, and *self-realization*.

Another human capability crucial to human flourishing that education should aim to develop is "being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a "truly human" way".[49] We are born with many potentialities and latent capacities for the use of our faculties, but only socialization and education bring them to fruition throughout our lives. The process of increasing and refining the use of our reason and senses is by no means confined to the beginning of our lives or to the stage of formal education. But formal education gives us a crucial meta-capacity: the capacity to direct our own learning, meaning to keep improving and developing our abilities to use our senses, to think, imagine, and reason throughout our lives.

I argue that learning must be cultivated as a habit, meaning that students should not only acquire the ability to learn, but also the motivation to do so for the rest of their lives. As Dewey puts it, a successful education represents "a continuous process of growth, having as its aim at every stage an added capacity for growth".[50] Both learning and growth are to be understood as properties of individuals and collectives. Attitudes towards learning formed in school are crucial in shaping the development of human beings – both as individual agents and in their social and political existence – long after their school years have concluded. Part of what the capacity to keep learning involves at a collective level, I will argue, is a certain attitude towards our social and political institutions that is best captured in terms of a *de-reified imagination*.

[48] Nussbaum, Martha C. *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*. Vol. 3. Cambridge university press, 2000, p. 79-80.
[49] Nussbaum 2000; Nussbaum, Martha C. "Women's education: A global challenge." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29, no. 2 (2004): 325-355, p. 352.
[50] Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, Chapter Five, p. 54.

i. Reconfiguring the School-Production Nexus: An Ideal of Free, Meaningful Work

Given the strong pressures exercised on the system of education by interests in maximizing productivity, efficiency, and national competitiveness, the present organization of production will have effects on our education system. But that does not mean that the other direction of influence is completely causally inefficacious. Schools can contribute to changing relations of production by changing the ways in which they subjectivize students with the express purpose of resisting alienation – both in schools and in the subsequent inequitable distribution of meaningful work.

There are a few features of unalienated or meaningful work that I believe we should pursue in schools and beyond. Recall the broad definition of work invoked in Chapter III, namely end-oriented appropriation or any activity by which one is actively engaged in altering the surrounding world in pursuit of a goal. A few features characterize work that is meaningful and freeing: *social value*, *power enhancement*, *conscious control*, and *self-realization*. First, work that is freeing is performed at least in part because of the values and goods that the activity realizes, rather than merely out of necessity. When we labor in the realm of necessity, the time devoted to the activity is not valuable in itself, but a cost we must incur. By contrast, we are free when we pursue work for its own sake, and both the process and products of our labor do not have merely instrumental value in our eyes.[51] Our goal should be to reduce the realm of necessity and maximize the realm of freedom, understood as the time we engage in activities we value.[52] Second, work should engage a wide range of the powers and abilities of those who perform it productively, in a way that frees or enhances them for future use. Whether our technical skills are perfected or our ability to work cooperatively with others improved, work is free when it empowers us. By contrast, in alienated labor workers often sacrifice their well-being and numb or degrade their physical and mental powers. To put this requirement in Dewey's terms, freeing work is conducive to learning and growth – it makes our present experiences more meaningful to us and enhances our control over future experiences.

[51] Wills, 2024, p. 85.
[52] For a compelling elaboration of Marx's idea of the realms of necessity and freedom, see Hägglund, Martin. *This life: Secular faith and spiritual freedom*. Pantheon, 2019.

Third, freeing work is at least partly responsive to the conscious control and design of those who engage in it. Rather than receiving orders to perform a predefined task in a predetermined way, each individual is a participant in the collective decision-making process that determines the nature and the distribution of labor. Finally, labor is freeing when it is a possible avenue for self-realization and self-expression. In laboring to transform the world in accordance to certain standards and values I endorse, I also refashion myself. Labor inevitably involves this bidirectionality: both the world and the agent – their needs and powers – are changed. The process is freeing when one can self-consciously pursue or endorse one's self-transformation.

These are not to be read as necessary and sufficient conditions for unalienated, freeing work, which stands in perfect opposition to its alienated counterpart. Rather, they are features of freeing work that can and do come apart in our activity, which results in a spectrum of work between the unalienated and alienated poles. Crucially, this means that the same activity can be more or less alienating when performed under different conditions – e.g. I am more alienated washing dishes as your maid in exchange for a wage than washing dishes at my friend's house after we made dinner together. As Dewey puts it, "in the degree in which men have an active concern in the ends that control their activity, their activity becomes free and voluntary and loses its externally enforced and servile quality".[53] However, the account I am endorsing is not purely procedural. Washing dishes is more in the realm of necessity than freedom, no matter how creative we are in our philosophical redescriptions of our agency and the action in question. In its typical form, time spent washing dishes is neither inherently valuable nor conducive to more meaningful future experiences or growth.

Making learning and teaching into meaningful work means striving to realize all of these features in as many school activities as possible. It will not be possible to fully eliminate alienated work. Some forms of schoolwork will be more tedious and less conducive to self-realization than

[53] Dewey 1997, p. 260.

others. Students will also subjectively perceive and experience some school work as alienating even when it is intrinsically valuable and conducive to their growth and self-realization. This is inevitable insofar as students' reason and judgment are not fully developed, as well as due to variation in their tastes and aptitudes that will result in some students finding opportunities for self-expression in music more than in mathematics. But teachers should strive to justify the value of all school work in ways that appeal to different students' sensibilities so as to make their subjective attitudes align with the objective character of the work.

Moreover, pursuing work that is freeing in school is valuable both in itself, as part of children's fulfilment, as well as in terms of their subjectivation as social agents. Being accustomed to meaningful work in school makes it more likely for individuals to seek meaningful work when they enter the labor market.[54] This does not mean they will find it. Indeed, their expectations will likely be thwarted in most contemporary workplaces. But if sufficiently cultivated in school, the demand for free, meaningful work will lead to productive discontent and transformative solidarity, be it through collective organizing for better conditions, advocating for the automation of certain tasks, or struggling to secure more free time to engage in work that is meaningful.

The proposals I outline in the following subsections, namely changing methods of assessment to cultivate learning as a habit and changing K-12 curricula to de-reify our social and political imaginations, do not presuppose that meaningful work opportunities already exist for students to enter them upon leaving school. Instead, they show how schools can pave the way for their establishment and proliferation. This orientation echoes Dewey's conception of the role of progressive schools:

> The school cannot immediately escape from the ideals set by prior social conditions. But it should contribute through the type of intellectual and emotional disposition which it forms to the improvement of those conditions.[55]

[54] As Syed and Benkler put it, "Every individual should be a "self-directing adult possessing sufficient embodied knowledge to exercise power in one's social relations of production, in particular to demand and engage in intrinsically meaningful work"("Reconstructing Class Analysis", 2023, p. 39).
[55] Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. Free Press, 1997, p. 136.

ii. Changing Methods of Evaluation and Assessment: Learning as a Habit

How can we make learning better approximate the ideal of freeing, meaningful work just described? In this section I argue that changing methods of evaluation is an important step to resisting students' alienation towards each other, their schoolwork, and their own learning. Beyond the numerous quantitative studies I cite in this section, the experience of grades and high-stakes testing distorting students' relation to learning, especially in early children, is ubiquitous. The converse, taking joy in learning, and doing school work in order to have one's curiosity and interest satisfied, is less widespread but thoroughly documented.

Take, for example, Amartya Sen's story of his early education years in the experimental Santiniketan, a school founded and developed by the Indian poet, philosopher, reformer, and fellow Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore.[56] The Santiniketan school was and remains famous for its progressive mission and emphasis on children's holistic development. Classes take place largely outdoors, the curriculum spans Eastern and Western culture, history, and art, in addition to mathematics and the sciences, and students learn not only from experts in various fields who serve as their teachers, but from visitors from around the world.[57] Especially remarkable is Sen's commentary about the intellectual rigor and intensity of learning the school made possible through a *lack* of serious examinations and discipline through grades.[58] This episode in Sen's life reveals how deeply Tagore's philosophy of education inspired his own understanding of development and freedom. It also gives a window into what an unalienated orientation towards one's learning looks and feels like:

> Santiniketan was fun in a way I had never imagined a school could be. There was so much freedom in deciding what to do, so many intellectually curious classmates to chat with, so many friendly teachers to approach and ask questions unrelated to the curriculum, and – most importantly – so little enforced discipline and a complete absence of harsh punishment. […] the idea that the exercise of freedom has to be developed alongside the capacity to reason became increasingly clear to me as my education in Santiniketan

[56] Sen, Amartya. *Home in the world: A memoir*. Liveright Publishing, 2022, Chapter 3: School without walls, p. 35-56.
[57] Sen mentions Mahatma Gandhi and Eleanor Roosevelt's visits to the Santiniketan school as particularly impactful on his development (Ibid, p. 48-49).
[58] Ibid, p. 40. Sen recalls how a teacher reacted to a classmate's "stellar" exam performance: "You know, she is really quite original, even though her grades are very good." (p. 52).

> proceeded. If you have freedom, you will have reason to exercise it – even doing nothing would be a kind of exercise. It is the training to make use of the *freedom to reason* (rather than fearing it, as rote learners are taught to do) that seemed, as my school years proceeded, to be one of the things Tagore was most strongly trying to advance through his unusual school. The exceptional importance of that combination – freedom and reason – has remained with me all my life.[59]

I am interested in what it takes to cultivate the 'freedom to reason' that Sen describes in this passage. In particular, what assessment practices can help us counter alienation and develop learning as a freeing habit? The proposal I outline in the rest of this section is relatively close within our horizon of possibility, but it has potentially transformative implications. It is a goal that progressive educators have advocated and worked towards for many years, but the alternative assessment practices they propose remain isolated experiments. The discussion in this section is meant to provide further theoretical support and justification for these efforts.

A growing number of teachers are joining the 'ungrading' movement, which aims to reduce our reliance on, and eventually renounce, numerical grades.[60] Educational studies have overwhelmingly shown that grades, and more generally standardized forms of summative assessment, do not advance learning and in fact harm the social environment of the classroom in a number of ways. Summative assessment, or backward-looking assessment primarily focused on rating completed work, is here contrasted with formative assessment, which is forward-looking in its focus on using present work to provide feedback for further improvement.[61] Because they make salient one's ranking among peers or relative to a standard, grades offer an incentive external to learning. Focusing on this external incentive harms students' intrinsic motivation, i.e. their desire to attain certain skills and knowledge, satisfy their curiosity, etc. It does so by shifting focus from

[59] Ibid, p. 37, 42.
[60] For helpful articulations of the goals and motivations of ungrading, see Stommel, Jesse. "How to ungrade." (2018); Ungrading: an introduction (2021); Undoing the Grade: Why We Grade, and How to Stop (2023).
[61] See, for example, Black, Paul & Wiliam, Dylan. "Developing the theory of formative assessment". *Educational Assessment Evaluation and Accountability*, 2009. 21. 5-31.

what one is learning to how well one is performing relative to peers, which in turn increases students' anxiety and self-doubt while decreasing trust in each other and their teachers.[62]

Intrinsic motivation, or interest in the activity itself, is paramount to free, meaningful work, and more generally to a flourishing human life. Dewey defines 'interest' starting from the word's etymology as an intermediary stage between an individual's present powers and future goals. The means to attain an end, the actions to be performed and difficulties to be overcome, are "of interest" when they represent a bridge between an agent's present capacities to the attainment of a desirable result.[63] Effort and discipline are continuous with interest, rather than opposed to it, in this picture. Discipline without the grip of an interest is useless, while interest without discipline is impotent: "interest measures – or rather is – the depth of the grip which the foreseen end has upon one in moving one to act for its realization".[64]

Grades and other forms of external reward and punishment are poor substitutes for interest in learning. Not only do these sticks and carrots harm students' intrinsic motivation, they alienate them from their own capacities and from each other, as I argued in Chapter III. Educational alienation prepares subjects for a lifetime of alienated work. Much like wage cuts and raises in the workplace, grades are a facile method of controlling and directing many different individuals' behaviors in the short-term without knowing anything about them. The alternative is much more difficult. It entails particularized attention and demands more time from teachers. Eliciting students' interest in various topics and tasks requires becoming acquainted with their needs and abilities, and building a bridge between their current interests and the more distant educational ends.[65]

[62] See, for example, Chamberlin, Kelsey, Maï Yasué, and I-Chant Andrea Chiang. "The impact of grades on student motivation." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 1 (2018): 16; Kohn, Alfie, and Susan D. Blum. *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*. West Virginia University Press, 2020; Mabry, Linda. "Writing to the rubric: Lingering effects of traditional standardized testing on direct writing assessment." *Phi Delta Kappan* 80, no. 9 (1999): 673.
[63] Dewey, p. 127.
[64] Ibid, p. 130.
[65] Dewey, p. 130.

Formative, as opposed to summative assessment, is one way to do so. By working closely with students on long-term projects with built-in opportunities for constructive feedback, revision, and self-reflection at various milestones, teachers can more easily gain knowledge of their existing abilities and needs. Summative assessment in the form of grades is often an obstacle to obtaining this type of knowledge. Teachers can learn more about a student's skills and level of mastery by observing how they improve on the basis of feedback, as opposed to assigning a numerical mark to an isolated snapshot of their work. Asking students to reflect upon their learning process and to self-assess encourages the metacognitive reflection that should accompany free, meaningful work – how is this work contributing to my growth and self-realization? Who am I becoming as a result of engaging in this work? What is the value or interest of this work for others?

iii. Changing the Curriculum: Dereifying Social and Political Imagination

Changing assessment methods to resist alienation and realize the ideal of free, meaningful work must be accompanied by a similarly significant shift in curricula. Many education scholars and policy-makers have throughout time argued that K-12 education must let go of its focus on the passive transmission of bodies of information and training in specialized skills.[66] Instead, it must emphasize the acquisition of capabilities that serve as tools of the *imagination*, i.e. the structure of our minds that is least computable and formulaic, and that allows us to create new connections (synthesis) while undermining old ones (subversion).[67] But cultivating the imagination, much like cultivating autonomy, is a relatively empty goal. And the distinction between teaching students *how* to use their higher-order reasoning capacities, without teaching them *what* to think, as I argued in my critique of liberal theories in Chapter I, is an untenable one. The possibilities individuals have to imagine a new life for themselves and a different future for their communities, much like their

[66] Some of the alternative schools movement, including the Waldorf model based on the theories of Rudolf Steiner, are centered on this critique (see, e.g. Carlgren, Frans, and Arne Klingborg. *Education towards freedom: Rudolf Steiner education*. Lanthorn Press, 1976).
[67] Unger, *The Self Awakened*, p. 132.

possibilities for forming, revising, and pursuing conceptions of the good, depend on the cultural horizons and conceptual vocabularies available to them. The question I pursue here, then, is how school curricula can cultivate powers of imagination conducive to progressive social and political transformation.[68]

While this might sound paradoxical, the beginnings of a radical democratic education are, in many respects, surprisingly similar to a conservative one. More specifically, I argue that the cultivation of a transformative social and political imagination begins with a thorough acquaintance with a particular historical and cultural legacy. But as I will show in this section, they also differ in crucial respects. My proposals are also aligned with contemporary advocates of an expanded, universal 'liberal arts' education committed to exposing students to a wide range of humanity's intellectual pursuits and experiments in living. This entails a curriculum including the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics, as opposed to a narrow professional training.

However, many existing liberal arts approaches go wrong by perpetuating a strict dichotomy between practical or vocational pursuits, those which render useful services and goods in our societies, and higher intellectual engagement, valued for their own sake and often associated with leisure. This dualism misses the point of the conception of the human just presented, which is that both types of knowledge and activity are inextricably linked in the achievement of human freedom. We cannot be free if we are not free when working to satisfy our needs. And for us to be free in our work, we have to acquire precisely the kind of liberal knowledge not associated with the vocational, the kind of knowledge that allows us to understand and gain collective control of the social aims and products of our labor. For example, industrial manufacturing depends on highly specialized knowledge and skill in engineering, physics, and chemistry, but this knowledge is unevenly distributed between workers in the industry.[69] Industrial manufacturing is also made possible and governed by complex economic, social, and political relations that most workers have

[68] In Unger's words, the goal should be to enable "the transfiguration of the actual by the imagination of the possible." (Unger, *Democracy Realized*, p. 230).
[69] Dewey 1997, p. 259.

no understanding of or control over. Being able to participate in conversations about the division of labor, the direction of productive activity, and the organization of power within an enterprise would require skills and knowledge that spans the social sciences and humanities. The idea of liberalizing education would be to prepare all participants in production for the free, meaningful work that only a broad liberal education can ensure.

A 'liberal arts' education, then, should be aligned with the goal of democratizing access to flourishing and freedom for all, as opposed to giving cultural capital to the members of a professional and intellectual elites. As Dewey puts it,

> Democratic society is peculiarly dependent for its maintenance upon the use in forming a course of study of criteria which are broadly human. Democracy cannot flourish where the chief influence in selecting subject matter of instruction are utilitarian ends narrowly conceived for the masses, and for the higher education of the few, the traditions of a specialized cultivated class. […] [The narrowly utilitarian view] assumes that in the future, as in the past, getting a livelihood, "making a living," must signify for most men and women doing things which are not significant, freely chosen, and ennobling to those who do them; doing things which serve ends unrecognized by those engaged in them, carried on under the direction of others for the sake of pecuniary reward.[70]

The end goal is an organization of subject matter that seeks to contribute to both the flourishing of all individuals as well as their collective empowerment to imagine and work towards better forms of life.

So how do we orient a liberal arts curriculum towards the expansion of students' social and political imagination? As critical theories of education emphasize, schools tend to play an ideological role under conditions of injustice and oppression by preparing individuals to be fluent in present social arrangements and institutions and making them appear justified, natural, or immutable. One of the ideological orientations towards our social practices and institutions that schools contribute to developing is *reification*.[71] Social relations assume in the eyes of people who participate in them the "fantastic form" of things with an existence that is independent of their activity.[72] As the previous chapter explained, commodification is one type of reification, whereby

[70] Dewey 1997, p. 192.
[71] See Lukács, Georg. *History and class consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics*. MIT Press, 1972, especially p. 84-87.
[72] Marx, *Capital*, Part I, Chapter I, Section 4. Collected Works Vol. 35, *Marx & Engels Collected Works*.

the social relations of labor slip out from view as commodities take on a life of their own. But the phenomenon is much broader. Reification keeps us from realizing that many of the facts of our social world are products of our collective activity, and hence keeps us from recognizing ourselves as both 'authors and actors' of our history.[73]

While reification has been understood as a reasoning deficit or a distorted cultural form, I argue that we can understand one of its dimensions as a *pathology of the imagination*. By 'imagination' I mean our higher-order cognitive power to connect the actual to the possible: the ability "to 'see' in what is what is not there" or "the power-to-posit as capable-of-being that which is not", as Cornelius Castoriadis puts it.[74] This power "enables us to connect our actual experiences with possible ones, extending and projecting them into alternative pasts, presents, and futures".[75] Formal education plays a crucial role in developing imagination in its various guises, from artistic pursuits to social and emotional connections. Here I am more specifically concerned with schools' contribution to our *social and political* imagination, i.e. the power to imagine, at both an individual and collective level, possibilities of arranging our social and political worlds differently. To resist reification, we first need to see our norms and institutions as products of past acts of collective imagination and agency. In other words, a central purpose of progressive education should be to "rob the existent of naturalness" by leading students to understand the contingent and dynamic nature of their social worlds.[76]

One might object that school is the place where children become acquainted for the first time with social practices beyond their family and local community. How can this initial acquaintance at the same time develop their social and political imagination? Dewey's theory of the experimental method in education offers a helpful starting point. As a democratic pragmatist, he suggests experimentation as a solution to the generalized rigidity of our thought and behavior.

[73] Honneth, Axel. *Reification: A new look at an old idea*. Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 31.
[74] Castoriadis, Cornelius. *The imaginary institution of society*. MIT Press, 1987, p. 155, 162.
[75] Medina, José. *The epistemology of resistance: Gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and the social imagination*. Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 7.
[76] Unger, *Democracy Realized*, p. 230.

Scientific inquiry provides a good model for learning in general, and it is especially apt for capturing the development of the imagination.

Learning occurs, according to Dewey, when the ordinary experiences of the pupil acquire both continuity and purpose. The outcome of learning is that experiences move from an inchoate, disparate state to "fuller, richer, more organized form".[77] This does not happen spontaneously. It is the task of the educator to turn what would otherwise be aimless experience into intelligent activity by selecting means out of the available conditions (analysis) and arranging them in order to reach a chosen and intended aim (synthesis).[78] Dewey's suggestion is to use the scientific method as the starting point of this organization of experience in education by i) examining ideas as hypotheses, rather than assuming them as established truths; ii) observing the consequences that certain ideas produce in practice in order to test them; and iii) recording, reviewing, and summarizing the consequences of various tested hypotheses.[79]

What would it mean to approach all subject matter, and especially the study of the social and political world, using this scientific method? Instead of teaching students English, mathematics, biology, and history as separate disciplines, we could organize education around the study of a selection of historical and prehistorical civilizations' 'experiments of living', to borrow a phrase from John Stuart Mill.[80] This would entail understanding how different peoples answered questions about the surrounding world and their place in it, who they were and what the purpose of their life was, and how they should organize themselves accordingly. In a pragmatist vein, students would encounter constellations of norms, institutions, and concepts not as arbitrary or alien, but as "attempted solutions to practical problems that involve calling upon the cooperation and assistance of others".[81] It would also give students a sense of their own forms of life as provisional social experiments, whose faults and limitations they need not accept as natural and

[77] John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, New York: Macmillan, 1938, p. 73.
[78] Ibid, p. 77.
[79] Dewey, p. 86-87.
[80] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd (2016).
[81] Anderson, Elizabeth. "The Quest for Free Labor." *The Amherst Lecture in Philosophy* 9 (2014): 1-35, p. 5.

unchangeable, but can work towards overcoming. Encounters with other cultures and civilizations, whether past or present, make room for critical distance by cultivating a "double vision" over our present social setting.[82]

In addition to loosening traditional disciplinary boundaries to focus on experiments in living, we should restructure the subject matter around a series of fundamental questions. Education would thus mimic the historical organization of human knowledge in paradigms or worldviews that span the artificial boundaries between the contemporary instantiations of the arts and sciences. For example, rather than learning about Galileo, Kepler, and Copernicus in physics, the explorers of the 'age of discovery' in geography, and da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael in fine arts, they should cover the Renaissance as a whole and understand the connections and interdependencies of sciences, the arts, politics, and religion.[83] Instead of presenting a simplified overview of the various ideas that are dominant in each contemporary discipline, teachers would construct a historical narrative, neither teleological nor linearly progressive, of how the fundamental questions that face humanity have been answered throughout time and what lessons we can learn from these various attempts. Children would be taught to understand themselves and their own contemporary circumstances as simply another such experiment in history.

Approaching school subjects through civilizational experiments in living bears resembles the 'classical' model of education advanced by the conservative approach I reconstructed in Chapter I. The question for a democratic progressive approach is which civilizations are most relevant and useful to children's self-understanding as members of a social and political community that is facing certain problems collectively. I agree with conservative thinkers that at least *some* of the civilizations studied bear a genealogical connection to the nation to which the students belong as well as to their various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This allows students to understand themselves as part of a particular historical narrative, while recognizing that the contemporary

[82] Unger, Roberto Mangabeira. *The World and Us*. Verso Books, 2024, p. 592.
[83] For an alternative proposal that also seeks to acquaint students with past forms of life, or "alien forms of existence", see Kitcher, p. 287-289.

form of their society is just another experiment in living, rather than a set of natural or necessary circumstances. However, in contrast to some conservative approaches, pupils should not be encouraged to foster attitudes of deference or blind obedience to their cultural legacy. Indeed, one of the major difficulties with the classical education that centers on Greco-Roman antiquity and Christianity is that it stifles the imaginative and reconstructive powers of students because it involves "devotion to a closed canon."[84]

To balance the conservative impulse, the study of civilizations that do not bear a close genealogical connection to one's own should therefore also be encouraged. There is no reason to believe that valuable insights can only be gathered from the history and culture of one's own ancestors.[85] However, learning about other cultures should also not take the form of an anthropological review animated by relativism. An education that acquaints students with different cultures and their answers to the fundamental questions of life as if they were exhibits in a museum will not cultivate students' powers of imagination and transcendence. Knowledge of history and culture without limits, horizons, or perspective can be debilitating – children should learn about other civilizations insofar as this allows them to form their own ways of thinking, their own tastes and styles.[86] Thus, students should not be encouraged to appreciate differences between different cultures and peoples for their own sake, but insofar as their achievements, triumphs, failures, and tragedies can provide them with useful lessons and an illuminating context for the problems that their own societies are facing.

One example of a progressive approach to learning from historical experiments in living has been developed by the educational organization *Facing History and Ourselves*.[87] Their pedagogy seeks to instill in students a sense of our collective power to shape history – in the direction of both justice and injustice – by drawing lessons from and connections to historical case studies.

[84] Unger, *Democracy Realized*, p. 234.
[85] As Unger puts it, "no nation is so distant in historical time or cultural remoteness that we cannot hope to penetrate some of its sensibility and consciousness." (Unger, *The Religion of the Future*, p. 73).
[86] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the advantage and disadvantage of history for life*. Hackett Publishing, 1980.
[87] See Facing History and Ourselves, https://www.facinghistory.org/.

Their lesson plans often start with contemporary social injustices and seek to familiarize students with how members of their own societies are conceptualizing and responding to it. They then consider a historical case study that sheds light on either the history of that injustice or provides ways of thinking about the present problem:

> Students then explore a historical case study, such as the Holocaust, or a literary work like *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Night* and analyze how those patterns of human behavior may have influenced the choices individuals made—to participate, stand by, or stand up—in the face of injustice, hate, and, in some cases, mass murder. They come to realize that there are no easy answers to the complex problems of racism, antisemitism, hatred, and violence, no quick fixes for social injustices, and no simple solutions to moral dilemmas. Lastly, students examine how the history they studied continues to influence our world today, and they consider how they might choose to participate in bringing about a more just, equitable, and compassionate world.[88]

The acquaintance with dilemmas of the past should accompany a breakdown of the boundaries between specialized academic subjects as discrete bodies of knowledge. Instead, students should be encouraged to understand the cultural tools available to communities in particular historical circumstances. In the next section I build on the idea of expanding social and political imagination by adding a dimension of collaborative problem-solving to the goal of de-reification. This is a fundamental departure from our traditional forms of education, aimed at preparing children for "future responsibilities and success in life."[89] Limiting ourselves to this goal is not only self-defeating, as Dewey argues, but incompatible with the progressive aspiration of becoming freer together. We must be able to navigate the present social order, but we should not confine ourselves to living by the terms already established in the historical time and place we happen to be born. The task of education in a democracy committed to collective freedom is to prepare children to be a part of our shared world while giving them the tools to rescue us and themselves from this world.[90]

[88] Facing History and Ourselves, "Sequence of Study", https://www.facinghistory.org/how-it-works/our-unique-approach/our-pedagogy/sequence-study.
[89] Dewey, p. 18.
[90] On the idea of progressive education "rescuing the child from its world", see Unger, *False Necessity*, p. lxxxv.

By reforming the content of K-12 school curriculum in the manner described so far in this section, we can take steps in a direction of progressive politics that is well calibrated with the critical theory conception of the human. More specifically, this kind of education allows individuals to understand themselves, their current social, economic, and political situation as just another 'experiment in living' that is open to innovation, revision, and radical change precisely because it is the product of human activity. The proposed framework of progressive education fosters individual and collective powers of transcendence by shortening the distance between "context-preserving" and "context-transforming" activities in the thought and worldview of children.[91] Realizing that we are not the prisoners of a world with rules and structures to which we must resign, but rather the authors and agents of history, can free the imagination and transformative ambitions of individuals and collectives that will allow us to become bigger and freer together.

IV. Democratic Schools for Social Learning

One of the central capabilities that schools should inculcate is learning itself, and more specifically the ability to continue learning once one has left the context of mandatory schooling. The collective version of this capability is necessary to effectively exercise democratic control over one's material circumstances and social relations. It is not a coincidence that some critical theorists and progressive thinkers have seen a deep connection between learning on one hand and social justice, democracy, and progress on the other. For example, Rahel Jaeggi conceives of progress in a pragmatist, Deweyan spirit, as a series of attempts to solve problems and in doing so reflect critically on our forms of life (ensembles of practices) and the source of those problems.[92] Dewey himself defines successful learning processes, the result of which is growth in individuals or forms of life, as the "reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experience."[93] A

[91] Ibid.
[92] Jaeggi, p. 274-282.
[93] From *Democracy and Education*, cited in Jaeggi p. 282.

genuine learning process, as opposed to a deficient or lacking one, opens up the possibility of future experiences of learning.[94] Jaeggi develops a further criterion for evaluating a successful learning process. Forms of life often suffer from systematic 'social blockages', such as ideology, that prevent them from solving their problems and evolving.[95] Progress in learning, she suggests, amounts to removing the systematic causes of these blockages:

> […] if social blockages to learning involve systematic rather than contingent blockages of access to the foundations of knowledge, which are open to social reflection and can be implemented in learning processes, then progress in learning, which should be understood as a process of enrichment and differentiation, always requires in addition the removal of these systematic causes. In other words, progress in learning calls for reflection back upon the framework or the foundations of the very structure of practice and interpretation that causes such blockages.[96]

This view of social learning can help bring to the fore the connection between education as a formalized, institutionalized process and social and political progress. Education systems should be designed as laboratories for giving people the capacity to problem-solve and eliminate the social blockages in their forms of life in a democratic fashion. This involves much more than 'critical thinking abilities' or 'problem-solving aptitudes' as they are currently conceptualized. It requires a good understanding of the social and political world and the capacity and motivation to keep inquiring and understanding them past one's years of schooling.

A promising model for developing the capability of democratic self-governance and self-determination comes from theories of development and social change. The MIT design lab (D-Lab), where I had the opportunity to work on gender and development in a class led by Sally Haslanger and Libby MacDonald, seeks to empower communities around the world to be agents of transformation by improving their material conditions and making their social relations and norms more just. Unlike many international development interventions, D-Lab projects seek to build the creative capacity of people confronting various social and political problems, rather than

[94] Jaeggi, p. 282.
[95] Ibid, p. 285.
[96] Ibid, p. 285.

import ready-made solutions and technologies into their communities.[97] Haslanger articulates and theorizes two central components of the D-Lab methodology: consciousness raising and the design process.[98] Drawing on Marshall Ganz's public narrative approach, consciousness raising enables participants to come up with a collective story of oneself and one's community centered on past experiences, decisions, and values. These narratives are then connected with a 'story of now', articulating the pressing risks and threats to the community's wellbeing and values, as well as the collective resources and sources of hope available to address these challenges. As the narrative turns into strategy, "the story of now becomes a basis for collective action".[99]

Eliciting the self-understanding and motivation required for collective action, while crucial, is only the first step. To build creative capacity, a community must learn the skills necessary to design solutions to the problems they have identified. The D-Lab version of the design process starts from an assessment of resources one has at one's disposal, as well as an articulation of the relevant stakeholders and their potential involvement.[100] It then proceeds to iterate a cycle of brainstorming, choosing the best ideas, implementing them, and gathering feedback. The spirit of creative capacity building is to develop in a community not only a sustainable way of addressing a problem in a democratic fashion, but investment in the process of problem-solving itself. This ensures the transposability of both skills and knowledge from one challenge and design process to another.[101]

Creative capacity building ought to be scaled up and implemented in education systems. The contrast between a group that goes through the co-design and creative capacity building process and a classroom of students undergoing citizenship education in a civics or government class is stark. The former builds not only abstract knowledge and critical thinking skills, but

[97] See D-Lab on Creative Capacity Building https://d-lab.mit.edu/approach/creative-capacity-building-ccb.
[98] Haslanger, Sally. "Situated Knowledge and Situated Values: Co-Designing Social Justice." *The Amherst Lecture in Philosophy* 16 (2023a): 1–26, p. 16-18.
[99] Haslanger, Sally. "Situated Knowledge and Situated Values: Co-Designing Social Justice." *The Amherst Lecture in Philosophy* 16 (2023a): 1–26, p. 18; see also Haslanger, Sally, Benjamin Lecture II, 2023b, p. 14.
[100] Haslanger 2023b, p. 15; 2023a, p. 19-20.
[101] Haslanger 2023b, p. 16.

democratic solidarity and a deep recognition of collective agency and power. Nothing begets trust in democratic self-governance like past experiences of successful democratic self-governance and problem-solving. Democratic theorists and policymakers have recognized this and a number of initiatives for action civics, which gives students "opportunities to *do* citizenship themselves through a guided process of research, action, and reflection" already exist.[102]

Nevertheless, an important difference between centering creative capacity building and merely expanding civics courses in existing curricula is that the former could infuse and reshape the entire educational experience of students. 'Creative capacity building' should not be a separate subject in addition to history, science, and math, but should instead reframe the organization of subject-matter beyond disciplinary boundaries. This is what Dewey has in mind when he says that the direct experiences of pupils and their present needs must guide knowledge acquisition. Records of knowledge, systematized as packages of information in the various disciplines, are in our present systems of education mistaken for actual knowledge, which is "an outcome of inquiry and a resource in further inquiry".[103] In order for students to be motivated to engage in inquiry, the questions that drive inquiry must become their own, by being calibrated to their current needs and capacities.

One striking example of education shaped by creative capacity building is the Citizen School in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Among other reforms to increase direct democracy in the region in the past two decades, including participatory budgeting, the schools were created as experiments in radical democratization of access to the school, to knowledge, as well as of the management of the school's affairs.[104] Instead of starting from traditional disciplinary boundaries and seeking to make the knowledge relevant to local students, the Citizen Schools designed their curricula through

[102] Levinson, Meira, and Mildred Z. Solomon. "Can our schools help us preserve democracy? Special challenges at a time of shifting norms." *Hastings Center Report* 51 (2021): S15-S22. Levinson and Solomon mention a number of organizations dedicated to action civics: "Generation Citizen, Public Achievement, Mikva Challenge, Project Citizen, Youth on Board, and others associated with the National Action Civics Collaborative and with Youth Participatory Action Research initiatives".
[103] Dewey, p. 187.
[104] Gandin, Luis Armando, and Michael W. Apple. "Can education challenge neo-liberalism? The citizen school and the struggle for democracy in Porto Alegre, Brazil." *Social Justice* 29, no. 4 (90 (2002): 26-40.

community research and deliberation about their main collective concerns. The approach, similar in spirit to the public narrative and co-design approaches, created interdisciplinary 'thematic complexes' around clusters of social issues. Rather than studying civics and history as presented by national Brazilian textbooks, students learned about their own social worlds as active social and political agents engaged in specific struggles. For example,

> [O]ne of the schools organized its thematic complex in the socio-historic area in order to examine questions directly linked to the interests and problems of the community. At the centre of the complex was the issue of the community's standard of living. Three sub-themes were listed: rural exodus, social organization, and property. The issues raised in relation to the sub-theme of rural exodus reflected the origin of the community--people living now in a favela, but who were originally from the rural areas. This is a common story in the favelas where people who had nothing in the rural areas came to the cities, only to become more marginalized. Other issues to be discussed were migration movements, over-population of the cities, an 'unqualified' workforce and marginalization. In the social organization sub-theme, issues to be discussed related to temporal, political, spatial and socio-cultural relations. These issues represent important questions in the organization of the community: the excessive and uncritical pragmatism of some in the associations, the connections with neighbourhood associations and the OP, and cultural issues such as religiosity, body expression, African origins, dance groups, and 'samba schools'. In the property sub-theme, issues were linked to the situation of families in the favela, living in illegal lots with no title, having to cope with the lack of infrastructure, and at the same time fighting for their rights as citizens.[105]

A few points of contrast stand out between the pedagogical approaches just described and standard citizenship education. First, the process is an embodiment of *praxis* or theoretically-informed critical action. It not only describes and explains to students various aspects of their social and political worlds, but makes them co-participants in social and political action. It also gives students the opportunity to draw both practical and theoretical connections between a set of ends and a set of means. Regardless of how successful the co-design process is in the short-term, it has made meaningful and salient to students the problem they were facing, means available to address it, and a set of social relations formed by the co-design process. If the group dealt with a climate-related challenge, for example, a set of scientific facts about global warming transformed into a story about a problem facing one's community and the resources available to address it.

[105] Gandin & Apple 2002.

Second, unlike many civic and political education currently implemented in schools, the co-design process does not only develop students' ability to reason and talk about a certain problem. The liberal and democratic versions of citizenship education tend to emphasize critical thinking skills as central to problem-solving. In the best version of this approach, students will learn about and then debate amongst themselves a public policy issue. It goes without saying that critical reasoning is an important piece of the process of collective self-governance, but it is a similarly empty one, much like the liberal notion of autonomy. It gives students no particular normative vision or attachment to a particular community, which are essential to any democratic process of self-governance and problem-solving.

Consciousness raising, as opposed to critical thinking, is the first step of the co-design methodology for precisely this reason. The process of experience and value articulation, at both an individual and collective level, makes a social or political challenge one's own. It gives participants a practical orientation, as opposed to a merely theoretical and abstract one, towards a problem. It also teaches them how to take up other social and political issues as their own later on. The classical civic and politics education model, on the other hand, at best produces students who are capable of coming up with for-and-against reasons for particular political proposals. But the otherwise passive voter who can understand the policy brief written by someone else and form an opinion does not come anywhere close to meeting the standard of collective freedom I have been arguing for.

Schools should promote 'conscious social reproduction', but this entails much more than tolerance, the ability to listen to others, and to engage in respectful disagreement and deliberation with them. It involves a sense of belonging to a group with an identity and values one has helped shape, addressing problems that one recognizes as one's own.

Finally, it is not enough for educational access to be democratized and the content of curricula transformed. The social structure and organization of K-12 classrooms must also change in order to habituate students to participate in higher forms of democratic cooperation. The

traditional classroom model of the classroom is hierarchical and antidemocratic. With the exception of some (usually elite) schools that have already adopted more cooperative modes of learning and teaching, pupils are encouraged to be docile, receptive, and obedient, and to treat learning as a process of external imposition and discipline.[106] In their rapport with each other, students are encouraged to be competitive and self-interested. Such an educational paradigm is not compatible with the individual and collective empowerment that a progressive agenda aims for. For this reason, an important aspect of education reform must be to replace the "authoritarianism and individualism that has traditionally characterized the classroom" with a social setting of cooperation between teachers and students, as well as among students.[107]

Education should set up habits of cooperation among students and experimental practices such as the teaching of students by other students should be attempted.[108] One step in this direction would be to break down the strict divisions in age that characterize current classrooms. Within cycles of education (i.e. primary, middle, and high school), pupils should not only be learning and interacting with peers of exactly the same age as them. The strict division by age habituates students to accept hierarchies and social divisions that are arbitrary and irrational. There are things that an 8-year-old can teach an 11-year-old just like there are ways in which an 18-year-old can be a mentor to a 14-year-old. While there certainly are differences in the physical and cognitive development and maturity levels of children at different ages that sometimes warrant separate classrooms for 7-year-olds and for teenagers, this is by no means a good reason to prevent educational interactions across age groups.

However, although creating more cooperative practices is crucial, this does not mean that hierarchy should be eliminated from the classroom. The teacher's authority is essential to the educational process. But this authority should be recognized and accepted as justified by pupils, rather than forcefully and tyrannically imposed. In order for children's experience in school to be

[106] Dewey, p. 18.
[107] Unger, *The Knowledge Economy*, p. 95.
[108] Ibid.

educational, it must be guided, organized, and controlled by the teacher. Dewey criticizes the emerging progressive schools of his day for replacing the external control exercised by the teacher with "conduct dictated by pupils' immediate whim and caprice."[109] If education is to form students that are capable of self-control and self-discipline, it must habituate them to respecting norms that might contradict their immediate impulses and desires.

What Dewey proposes is a form of social control that does not violate freedom. Instead of authority being a personal attribute of the teacher, "an arbitrary expression of power and desire to dictate," social control must emanate from the group activities in which the classroom is engaged, as is the case in rule-governed games and sports.[110] The teacher can sometimes personally exercise authority, but any such intervention should be explained to the students in terms of the broader goals of cooperative group activities. Moreover, the teacher must have already established their status as a "representative and agent of the interests of the group as a whole" in order for their authority to not be experienced as a form of tyranny.[111]

This approach to social control also shows that authority can be established in multiple ways. Mentorship and parental relations often involve hierarchy and authority without being *authoritarian*. Moreover, in cooperative activities such as team sports authority emerges spontaneously, such as when a player takes initiative and is playing particularly well and the others assume secondary roles in order to afford him the ability to direct the game. Dewey notes that very young children are usually adept at distinguishing between legitimate and spontaneous forms of authority and externally imposed, oppressive power. When playing with each other, children will allow a member of the group to take the lead if "his conduct adds to the experienced value of what they are doing," but they will reject others' efforts to usurp the game as "bossy" or "dictatorial."[112]

[109] Dewey, p. 65.
[110] Ibid, p. 54-55.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Dewey, p. 55.

Conclusion

In this chapter I argued in favor of a few directions that an education committed to deep democracy, freedom, and flourishing should take. I framed my proposals as solutions to the problems of alienation, commodification, and fragmentation analyzed in Chapter III. First, I argued that education should be de-fragmented and de-commodified by eliminating the funding of schools through local property taxes, as well as the divisions between traditional public schools on one hand and charter, magnet, private, and home schools on the other. I argued that an education oriented towards providing all students *fair access to development* should combine a maximally redistributive funding scheme with highly localized democratic control within schools and districts. These policies are closest from our present educational system in that they could be implemented as reforms to our federal, state, and local policies in the short term. They would nevertheless be non-reformist reforms, enacting a paradigm shift away from the fragmentary logic of education as a competition for resources. Second, I argued in favor of reconfiguring the school-family nexus by redrawing the division of care labor in ways that involve both state support and the involvement of other adult community members in the care of children. This is an area of change that can be supported by policy and legislation, but requires a broader shift in social norms and practices towards greater collective responsibility and solidarity.

Third, I argued for a number of proposals to resist alienation in education by cultivating three central capabilities: labor, learning, and the imagination. I proposed modeling learning on an ideal of free, meaningful labor that has the following features: *social value*, *power enhancement*, *conscious control*, and *self-realization*. I argued that one of the central capabilities that schools ought to cultivate is teaching students how to learn and instilling habits of learning. I showed how changing practices of assessment away from summative and towards formative evaluation can contribute to this goal. Finally, I sketched a direction for a liberal arts curriculum oriented towards the development of students' social and political imaginations by transmitting knowledge via historical experiments in living.

Fourth, I argued in favor of promoting social learning through our schools. Building on a pragmatist conception of collective progress, I argued that schools are crucial institutions for enabling societies to problem-solve and eliminate the social blockages in their forms of life in a democratic fashion. I argued that one way they can do this is by aiming towards creative capacity building, which entails both consciousness-raising and iterative processes of co-designing, testing, and refining solutions to social problems.

It is worth pausing to note the difficulties that this program for education faces in the face of the structural injustices I analyzed in Chapter III. How will even a radically revised curriculum improve access to development for students who will go on to perform low-wage, low-skilled work? I argued that changing individual students' orientations towards their work by changing the structure and content of education will not address the systemic barriers to pursuing free and meaningful work upon exiting school. Many, if not most, jobs that are available for children to work in, are not enriching of individuals' "emotion and intellect", nor capable of eliciting the "full and free interest" of those who perform them.[113] Their rewards are purely or mostly external – a means to meeting one's needs. Having all students pursue a liberal arts education seems out of touch with the reality of the world of work.

First, there are reasons to believe that we are in the midst of a global shift in the kind of work available to most people and the nature of our productive activity. Many social and political theorists have described the current stage of capitalist production as a 'knowledge economy', characterized by high-skilled forms of cooperation and higher-order cognitive powers. More and more workers are entering these forms of cooperation already. I agree with those who argue that rather than resisting automation we should consciously pursue the transition of all workers into the knowledge economy, especially by automating various parts of our low-skilled 'service industry'.[114] Crucially, most care work does not belong to this category of work that I think can

[113] Dewey, p. 135.
[114] See Unger, Roberto Mangabeira. *The knowledge economy*. Verso Books, 2022.

and should be automated. As I argued in the first section of this chapter, more people should be involved in care labor not only because of our current shortage and inequities in care provision, but because much of the work itself is a paradigm example of free, meaningful labor.

Finally, a progressive education should not aim at the reproduction of present social and economic conditions, but at their betterment. The hope is that this type of education will lead citizens and workers to organize and demand a restructuring of many kinds of jobs towards the ideal of free and meaningful work described here. Rather than conforming to a social world plagued by various pathologies, education should offer a source of critique and a normative yardstick by which to measure the economic and political activities we enter upon leaving school. An education that gives students the desire and necessary capabilities to always keep learning and flourishing will likely lead to discontent when encountering many of the opportunities on contemporary labor markets. A transformative education that builds students' social and political imagination paves the way for this discontent to be politically fruitful.

Conclusion

In spite of the appearance of intense political conflict, a dominant vision for education has entrenched itself in the United States and other liberal democracies in the past decades. It is a vision of relinquishing collective responsibility and attachment to public education in favor of privatization and individual choice. It has been called 'standards-based reform', 'neoliberalization', 'marketization', and 'disruption', depending on the ideological perspectives and specific interests of commentators. It has *reified* itself in our system of education to such an extent that replacing it seems to many impossible, and alternative visions are easily dismissed as utopian. Its promoters have been animated by a wide range of political impulses, from recovering the lost greatness of the past to bringing our education systems in line with scientific, technological, and economic progress. They have accordingly deployed a diversity of rhetorics, including that of nations in competition or even at war with external enemies and those of meritocracy and equality of opportunity.

This study has argued that this reified vision has taken hold of our political imaginations and has become institutionalized not in spite of liberal commitments, but because of them. In fact, the educational issues that have been subject to high-profile debates, including affirmative action, indoctrination, school choice, and parents' rights, emerge as issues and are intelligible as controversies only when starting from very specific liberal assumptions about the goals of education. These assumptions are shared by most political actors, which fall between a left and a right pole on the same liberal spectrum. Reconstructing these fundamental assumptions, I have argued, reveals most of our controversies as merely intramural squabbles.

The limitations of the liberal approach to education are on full display in the face of school choice, neoliberal standardization, and privatization. This is not to say that liberal theory or liberal philosophies of education are blind to the present injustices of our education systems. They certainly have resources to critique them and various theorists have done so in effective ways. However, the social ontology and normative vocabulary of liberal theories of education does not

hinder, and in some cases even promotes, the social and political pathologies I have been analyzing in the previous chapters. In spite of the best intentions of liberal progressive and egalitarian thinkers, we cannot fully name, let alone address, the harms of alienation, commodification, and fragmentation from within a liberal approach.

What about the conservative and democratic approaches? How do they fit in our contemporary education systems? To a certain extent, the division of the theories I have proposed in previous chapters is artificial. As practical political visions, they do not exist in separation and certainly have not evolved or functioned independently from each other. But I have tried to show there is value in analyzing their fundamental assumptions, normative commitments, and prescriptions by imposing a systematicity these visions lack. First, their systematization allows us to see that the dominant liberal understanding of education is neither natural nor inevitable. They emanate from a very particular set of social ontological assumptions about human nature and the nature of society. Second, the fact that conservative and democratic commitments in practice have been seamlessly integrated into the reified vision for education show the extreme malleability of liberal commitments. Liberal systems of education have allowed religious fundamentalist schools to coexist with secular progressive ones, vocational schools with elite preparatory academies, disciplinary traditional regimes with democratic experimentalism, and everything in between these extremes.

This malleability, proponents might suggest, is a virtue of political liberalism under conditions of reasonable disagreement. But as I argued in Chapter I, claims of neutrality distract from the emptiness of autonomy as a political ideal and in particular as an educational goal. The void created by abstaining from endorsing certain conceptions of the good over others is necessarily filled, but not through our conscious collective control. In our contemporary social systems, the formation of autonomous individuals has amounted to preparing workers and citizens for a particular regime of capitalist democracy, as well as a reactionary, nationalist, White supremacist culture.

In practice, then, our educational systems have been inculcating a range of conceptions of the good, albeit within the parameters of capitalist democracies, without ever owning up to them as such. This process of social reproduction, I have argued, is one well captured by critical theories. The ideals of individual autonomy and neutrality have obscured the reproduction of a social, economic, and political order that is in fact incompatible with individual and collective freedom in any meaningful sense. It is precisely an ideal of freedom along these lines that I have sought to articulate and defend in Chapter IV of this dissertation. It is not ethically neutral, since it involves substantive commitments to equalizing access to development through defragmentation and decommodification, and a robust understanding of human flourishing that involves meaningful work and the cultivation of our social imagination and collective democratic agency. It is nevertheless compatible with a plurality of comprehensive doctrines and life projects.

The vision I articulated for education builds on the rational kernels of the three approaches to education by readapting their normative goals to a more adequate social theory, one that recognizes the reproductive role of education. Following liberal theory, I take freedom seriously as a central goal of education, but recognize that individual autonomy is but one aspect of freedom and that schools play an even greater role in securing the conditions for our collective freedom to make and remake our social and political arrangements. This is already a democratic conception of freedom, but it goes beyond the proceduralism of most democratic theory, especially the deliberative strand, by imposing certain substantive conditions on our kinds of social and political arrangements. In Chapter IV, I articulated three such features based on a robust conception of human nature and flourishing. First, human beings cannot flourish if they are not individually involved in free, meaningful work, i.e. work characterized by *social value*, *power enhancement*, *conscious control*, and *self-realization*. Second, and relatedly, following a socialist feminist tradition, I argued that we must recognize the importance of care work and distribute its benefits and burdens in a way that allows all of us to take part in free, meaningful work. Third, we cannot flourish without the cultivation of our social and political imagination. I defined the imagination as an individual and

collective capability that allows us to break from a reified orientation towards our practices and institutions, meaning to see them as the products of our historical collective agency and under our future collective control.

The goal of cultivating a dereified social and political imagination, I argued, has surprising affinities with the conservative theory of education. Without a set of foundations and horizons, the power of the imagination is either empty or fanciful, decoupled from social and political reality. To see what our present social and political arrangements can become in the future, we must understand their past. Our norms and institutions are not part of the furniture of the universe, they are the collective feats of agency and imagination of past cultures and civilizations. Moreover, we must understand ourselves as part of a certain experiment in living. In order to be motivated and invested enough in changing their social worlds, students must care about them as their own and recognize their own identities and powers as dependent on a certain cultural legacy.

Has this project *really* been about education? My critiques of liberal, conservative, and democratic theories are certainly not limited to their visions for schooling. Instead, my critiques target their fundamental social ontological assumptions along with their central normative political commitments. My critique of the liberal conception of autonomy, for example, is not reducible to its inadequacy for liberal educational goals. What starts out in each case as an immanent educational critique turns into an external criticism that threatens the very foundations of each political theory. The same goes for my own constructive project. Given the wide-reaching social and political changes that must either precede or follow the educational reforms I suggest, my own vision seems less targeted at schools and more at changing our social structures and political institutions writ-large. Reconfiguring our social reproductive and productive relations far exceed school system reform and certainly cannot be accomplished merely via school reform.

I take the lack of specificity to education to be a virtue, rather than a limitation, of my arguments. The fact that a change in the function of our school systems is nothing short of

revolutionary for the rest of our social and political arrangements vindicates the initial insight of this project. I suggested in the introduction that we must recover Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey's insight that education is not simply one of the topics to which our political theories must speak, but the central task of politics. The methodological lessons gleaned from these canonical thinkers, which pointed in the direction of systematic political theorizing as the key to tackling education, resulted in a reorientation of normative priorities as well as political strategy. Returning to a theme of the critical approach from Chapter III, the question of whether education necessarily reproduces the dominant system or whether it can help change society seems more tractable. Education systems can initiate a paradigm shift – towards defragmentation, decommodification, and free, meaningful labor. The efficacy of these educational 'non-reformist reforms' will always depend on the concurrent changes in the social subsystems with which they are co-integrated: the state, the family, and economic production.

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