

**AN ARGUMENT FOR CRITICAL AND LIBERAL EDUCATION:
A SYNTHESIS OF ANCIENT AND MODERN THOUGHT**

NAOMI COUTO

School of Public Policy and Administration
York University - Toronto, Ontario
naomi@yorku.ca

On Ancient Thought

Karl Marx borrowed much from the ancient philosophers and in many ways he can best be described as a synthesis of the ancient and modern schools of philosophy. Despite this, Marx asserted that the duty of a political philosopher was to work towards the change of the world. This stands in direct contrast to Plato and Aristotle who sought to understand the world. In this essay, I will show that it is Marx's definition that can be best used to understand a given state and society. This is so mainly because of Marx's view of historical materialism. Each society creates the seeds for the next stage of human development. By doing this we gain an insight that is not superficial but that is quite substantive and useful, as I will prove below. Plato's fault lies in the fact that he so separates himself from the world that he denies economics and needed social relations. But when he does 'return to earth' he justifies upper class domination and has a disdain for the masses. Aristotle supersedes Plato by understanding needed social functions but again falls short by his concentration on private property and restricted citizenship. This makes him applicable in capitalist terms but detracts from the legitimacy of his argument. Marx is, as I stated above, the syntheses of the ancient and modern. His genius and the validity of his thought rest in the creative and contradictory combination of ancient social ethics with his scientific or economic approach.

Plato's philosophy began by synthesizing two main schools of Greek thought. On the one hand he agreed with Heraclitus that things were in constant flux, while on the other hand he agreed with Parmenides that fundamental reality was permanence. He stated that only the unchangeable, the higher truths were knowable. Plato believed that all men were created unequal, both morally and in their souls. This meant that everyone's potential was



not the same and that only a few could use reason to attain or understand these eternal truths. Fundamentally this makes Plato an aristocrat, since he believed that only those qualified (the few) should rule – the ruler qua ruler. He believed in a very hierarchal and structured society, in which the masses would be restrained from upsetting the balance (*dike*). To achieve this goal Plato endorsed the use of force through the Guardian class and through the use of censorship, education and the noble lie (a myth created by the Rulers to justify their rule).

Plato was a *substantialist* that is he rejected the finding of truth in the material world and sought it in higher wisdom and knowledge. From this perspective, it is easy to agree with Aristotle's objection that Plato was too speculative and utopian, and therefore too removed from actual societies and constitutions. This created a huge gap from the ideal to the actual state in the *Republic*. But when Plato returned to earth (the digression of the ideal state and in his work the *Laws*), he spoke of a society similar to feudalism and one based on upper class domination. After the ideal state he speaks of "timocracy" as found in Sparta, as the next best. As is known, Sparta was an oligarchic state that often fought against the democratic forces of Athens. Plato was looking at not creating the "best society" but creating the best society within the context of the Greek polis and within the context of maintaining inequality, upper-class rule, and most importantly, keep the majority, the lower classes, from participating. "It is clear that this championship of the people is the one and only root from which dictatorship and dictator can grow."¹ In fact, Plato despises tyranny, not so much because of its despotic and unfree nature, but because the tyrant gets power and appeals to the lowest strata of society by redistributing from the rich (the few) to the poor (the many).

There are many problems in applying Plato to any given state and society. He is so clearly unable to imagine equality and thereby majority rule. Plato can be applied to feudalist societies but his model does not include a view of history (since he found this useless) and it does not account for change. His view claims that the ideal society is one



based on inequality and class domination and that there is no room for the masses to participate. From this Plato is biased to the particular class that he was born into, he does not break the bonds of his class in order to truly see the need for liberation for all. Plato is also difficult to apply to any given state and society because he speaks of only the philosophers having the ability to rule. Once again he is discounting the majority and concentrating on his own biases.

In summation, Plato presupposes inequality and from that point on it is clear that his applicability is very limited since most societies have at least begun from the truth of equality. Therefore, it is very difficult to apply Plato to any other society except his own and feudalism. As stated above, Plato is also difficult to apply universally because of his class bias. His vision, when he returns to practical terms, is rule by the elites of society – namely, the nobility. Therefore, this is a view that is not applicable to a wide spectrum of society because of this bias and incomplete view.

To Aristotle there are three good states: Monarchy, Aristocracy and ‘Polity’ and three bad states: Tyranny, Oligarchy, and Democracy. Aristotle believed that all men were born equal and free. He began by looking at concrete constitutions of his time. To Aristotle, abstract and material were inseparable. He believed that man was a social animal, since man associated with others through the state and the expression of this was the constitution. He believed that you must have some material goods in order to be or do well. Aristotle’s ideal state was the “polity”, a medium between oligarchy and democracy. It combined that good point of oligarchy, private property, with the good point of democracy, majority rule. He believed that the middle class was the acceptable medium to rule, since the rich were too interested and the poor, or masses, were inept and liable to create instability. He, like Plato, believed that people of reason ought to rule and was violently opposed to any form of extremism. “Thus it is the greatest good fortune for those engaged in politics to have a middling and sufficient property, because where some possess very many things and others



nothing, either (rule of) the people in its extreme form come into being or unmixed oligarchy, or – as a result of both these excesses – tyranny.”²

What is striking about Aristotle is his defense of private property and the centre this issue has in his ideal state and citizenry. He believed that any citizen, one who participates actively in the state, must have private property and that this property must be distributed unevenly. To this end, he thought that manual laborers, such as artisans, mechanics and farm workers, were not fit to be considered part of the state and were subject to the property-holding rulers. These rulers must not be involved in any type of manual labour, since it was beneath them and did not allow them to take the time to be actively involved in the important decisions of the state. His objection to democracy was that he felt it took land from the wealthy. In Aristotle we see the beginnings of the later separation of public and civil society in the category of rights. He felt that equality of certain rights was necessary to appease the masses and, therefore, maintain the stability of the state.

In my estimate, Aristotle is nothing but a well-disguised aristocrat. His bias is towards property-holders and rule by these individuals. His disdain for the lower orders and, what Marx would call, the petty bourgeoisie is quite violent. His belief that if the masses rule they create instability ultimately emerges from his belief that they are inept. Like Plato, he believes that those of reason should rule. But for Aristotle the distinguishing feature is holding of property.

It is very difficult to apply Aristotle to any given state or society for several reasons. One reason being his lack of a holistic historical view that can travel beyond the confines of ancient Greece. His strength lies in his recognition of the importance of social relations and his understanding of economic motivation and its importance. But his defense of slavery and private property put him into the realm of the defense of privilege. Slavery is something that is not natural, and in the Marxist view, neither is private property. Aristotle is reflected quite forcefully in modern liberal-capitalist ideology and with it come all the



contradictions of that system. That is, the political or civil equality masking the true inequality, which is economic. Aristotle states that there is equality only as some kind of concession.

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle... Free man and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in a word oppressor and oppressed...³

The above statement is what Marx believed as a tendency that is what usually happened with a few exceptions, in the course of history. All periods retain class struggle with different types of classes. During bourgeois revolution it was between the ruling aristocracy and the up-coming bourgeoisie. Marx viewed history as being made not by individuals but by social aggrades. As an example, a person is a slave in and through society. In other words, his condition is a societal relationship. These classes are irreconcilable and remain in conflict. Often, the conflict is not violent or revolutionary. This conflict emerges when the class on top tries to extract as much labour as possible from the lower classes. In Marx's time he was referring to the proletariat (the worker) being dominated by the owners of the means of production (the factories, machinery etc...). The capitalist extracted profit from the proletariat, since it was the laborer that actually produced the valuable product for market sale. The proletariat worked for wages and therefore was subjected to the rule, almost slave-like, of the capitalist.

Marx saw that in the course of history, the proletariat would eventually overthrow the existing bourgeois order and replace it with a proletarian one that would eventually eliminate all class distinctions. His work, as a result, tended to focus on the working of the capitalist system and the bringing about of this new order. He and Engels worked to form the proletariat into a class (with its own consciousness), facilitate for the conquest of power by the proletariat and the elimination of private property.



Will to Change

In order for us to understand whether it is better to understand society, in the Platonic and Aristotelian sense, or to change it, in the Marxist sense, we must try to understand the true nature of humans and their society. If we believe that humans are living in the most natural way and that this way will never change, then we must seek to understand. But if we believe that society and human nature is constantly changing and that we have not reached our true nature, then we must seek to look at that the next step is, as well as the present one, and facilitate that change. I believe that we have gone through many changes in history, some positive, others negative, and I think that the facts of history seems to ascertain this point of view. In fact, it seems that the very nature of the world is change.

We must ask ourselves why this change occurs. In any society there is an existing order and within that order there is a class of individuals that benefit from it. In the case of feudalism, it was the aristocrats, while in the case of capitalism, it is the bourgeoisie, while in still other cases it may be a particular race or gender. Eventually, these forces gain consciousness and begin to demand and battle for acceptance and fair treatment – that is they seek to escape their oppression. Here is the mandate of a liberal and critical education. The mandate of engaging minds about their conditions and the possibility of the other. Moreover, they seek to change the existing society, at least in some way. Consequently, we have a galvanization of society between those who want change and those who would prefer the status quo.

Marx did not say that this process of change would go on forever but he did insinuate that it would continue until the majorities were heard and the oppression had ended. In other words, when there were no longer any groups to redress and ask for change than we would have reached the end of history and therefore the true nature of humanity: “Every mode of production carries its own negation within itself.”⁴



Like Plato and Aristotle, Marx understood that it was important to understand the world or society, as it was in order to understand the next stage of development. According to Marx, the system of operation has always created, with itself, the means for its ultimate demise. In Marx's case he sought to understand capitalism because within it, and its mode of production, he saw the future – namely, the proletariat. He saw an imperfect society where the proletariat was slave to the machine and the capitalist who owned that machine. Therefore, the proletarians were the ones with the force and destiny to enact the next change in society. To Marx it was not enough for a political philosopher to understand the world that he was in, since somewhere within the particular mode of production were the seeds of its own destruction. A political philosopher must be able to analyze the world, in relation towards the next stage of development on the road to human liberation.

Plato and Aristotle, as has been stated, sought to understand the world. This approach is lacking in comparison to Marx. To understand the world, as it is, is to say that the status quo will remain. It is to say that the world, society as it is, is humanity at its true nature. But, as we have seen, it is difficult to imagine man at his true nature, when, as Marx has shown, man is alienated from nature and from other men in social relations. As Marx states this:

While, therefore, alienated labour takes away the object of production from man, it also takes away his species-life, his real objectivity, as a species-being, and changes his advantage over animals into a disadvantage in so far as his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him.⁵

However, it is possible to apply Plato and Aristotle to their particular time period but beyond that there are several difficulties in the arguments and methods are found to be lacking. It is difficult to apply Plato or Aristotle to different time periods, while Marx's methods and rules can be applied in any time period. For in each time period, we will find elements of class conflict and of historical materialism. This advantage of Marx comes from his acceptance and study of change and how it must continue. To Plato and Aristotle,



change is basically unaccounted for since they assumed that you could not improve or want to change the model of the Greek city-states.

General Strengths of Critical Education and the Deficiencies in Ancient Accounts

Here I will be more concentrated on Marx's strengths or the adequate nature of his methods and theories than on Plato and Aristotle since I have already included criticisms of both thinkers. First and foremost, Marx is seeking the liberation of the human being. He understands that the duty of a political philosopher is to work towards this goal. To this end, he synthesizes two of the most influential strands of thought in the west, that is, ancient social ethics (reflected in Aristotle's *Ethics*) and modern economic and scientific theory (reflected in the English economists and Charles Darwin). This makes Marx a unique combination, in a Hegelian dialectical fashion. It is this that gives Marx his strength over Plato and Aristotle. For Plato denied the use of historicism and the material world in political philosophy, while Aristotle seemed to examine the existing world to the exclusion of higher educational values or goals to further social change. Aristotle's ideal state was a compromise, not the best state, but the least evil one.

Marx's view of history and specifically his idea of class struggle can be applied to ancient Greece. This is by nature of the universal character of Marx; "But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages viz., the exploitation of one part of society by the other."⁶ Marx's view is also more international in character. Plato and Aristotle were looking only at ancient, civilized Greece, while Marx recognized that there could be things in common between different people of different nations. He realized that nations had similar histories and states of development and that the proletariat would triumph in all.

What else does the history of ideas prove, than that intellectual production changes in character in proportion as material production is changed? The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.⁷



From the above quote we discover two things about Marx. First, he is able to actually go beyond and describe, unlike Plato and Aristotle, the influence and emergence of the class domination ideas. He realizes that ideology is often the main offspring of the dominant class and that it has been so in every age of human history. Second, he goes beyond his own time period and his own class and is able to understand the forces of change and the plight of the proletariat. According to this rule, Marx should have defended bourgeois values and the capitalist system since he was a member of that particular class. Yet, he understood that a few intellectuals would be able to surpass their class bias and speak for the downtrodden or for another class. Plato and Aristotle do not stand up to the same scrutiny. Plato defended inequality and a highly stratified society, which was similar to the rule of his own class, while Aristotle defended the values of property-holders and the middle class, which is where he seems to have come from. Therefore, of the three thinkers it is only Marx that is able to successfully break the bonds of his own class and the dominant ideology of his time.

One of the ways in which Marx is able to surpass both Plato and Aristotle, is by developing a comprehensive theory of history. He tells us about the conflict of classes as the moving force of history and the connection between this and the present mode of production. Plato ignores history completely, while Aristotle looks only at concrete examples of Greek antiquity. Therefore, they both lack the timeless analogies and methods that can be drawn from Marx, as well as, the general movement and forces that ultimately drive people and society. Without this, we cannot apply their theory to the rest of history. While in Marx, we find a theory and method that can satisfactorily explain the ebbs and flows of history, the gyrations, and explosions of violence and change and the squalor and depression of any time period. But more importantly, we can see a flow, a pattern of history. We can determine that we are on our way to something and that these particular forces of history will still be its thrust. This is very useful, not only in analyzing the past, but in trying to determine the future and, indeed, the very purpose and culmination of history.



Marx was a unique combination of ancient social ethicist and modern scientific and economist thinker. His social ethics are reflected in such ideas and concepts as alienation and the need of individuals to relate to each other in a real and human way. Contact and connection was necessary or each man would end up feeling completely isolated and alienated from everyone else. This in turn would be humanity in a very unnatural state. Marx recognized, as Aristotle and Plato, that man was a social animal. He must be able to interact with others; it is in his very nature. Therefore, any system or circumstances that impeded me from doing so is unnatural and it must be removed in order for that individual to be content, happy, and spiritually satisfied.

The economists of the industrial revolution such as David Ricardo and Adam Smith, as well as Charles Darwin affected Marx quite deeply. While the economists enriched his knowledge of the capitalist system, in Darwin he saw someone who had developed an indisputable formula that spoke about the natural development of man over time. Marx wanted to discover such a development in social terms. He wanted to be able to uncover the scientific laws that would explain the movements and changes of human social history. At the same time, he recognized the power of humans, as social beings, to change and help the course of history.

These two elements together made Marx's thought quite unique. He had a very special spiritual and social aspect, which successfully expressed the frustration of alienation and the capitalist system, and he had a very analytical and scientific side that was able to masterfully analyze the above-mentioned system. It is these two strands together that make Marx different from Plato and Aristotle in adding to our need of a critically engaged education system. For in the two ancients we have very structured and non-contradictory philosophies but in Marx we have the Hegelian dialectic in action. Because of this he is able to understand and perceive on so many different levels in comparison to Plato and Aristotle. This is so because he can at one moment speak of the need for social action, while at other moments he can scientifically analyze a particular system. It makes for a



very rich and substantial framework from which to analyze and understand history, society and forces of change.

An Aristocratic Tradition

Plato and Aristotle are part of a tradition in ancient Greece whose purpose it was to defend a declining and decadent aristocracy. Both understand that it was decadent and declining and they often heaped criticism on the aristocracy for it. Despite this, they saw the aristocracy as the only virtuous and able class to govern. “To put it briefly, the revolutionary nature of Plato’s political thought lies in his attempt to ‘aristocratize’ the polis, or politicize aristocracy – that is, to synthesis what were in their very essence antithetical forces in the history of Athens, the aristocratic principle and the political principle.”⁸ Plato was faced with a decadent aristocracy that was experiencing a sharp and violent decline at the hands of the ‘demos’. Therefore, it was imperative for Plato not only to revitalize his class but also to involve and politicize them.

“From the analysis of Aristotle’s political thought it should be apparent that, despite certain differences, he is a worthy political successor of Socrates and Plato, sharing their fundamental anti-democratic and authoritarian perspective.”⁹ From this quote it is clear that Aristotle only differed in tactics but his goal was to ensure the political domination of conservative elements and the exclusion of the masses. The aristocracy was suffering decline at the hands of the artisan and merchant class. Aristotle recognized this and forcefully argued for the exclusion of this class from governing in favour of the ‘leisured’ aristocracy.

Plato and Aristotle, like Socrates before them, sought to save and solidify the aristocratic form of government. Plato called for the politicization of the aristocracy and preached against the evils of democracy. Aristotle used deceptive tactics that at some points condoned democracy and equality but underneath it all was a disdain for the masses and a defense of aristocratic rule. Therefore, both thinkers were biased towards their class



and were in favour of the 'rule of the few'. These points make them defend privilege and therefore, unable to take up the type of educational reform needed at all levels of society. Marx stood for majority rule, namely, the emancipation of all and access to all from oppression. Marx was able to surpass the biases of class, position and disdain for the lower orders and develop a theory that included all in the struggle of history and make the lowest orders, those which Plato and Aristotle despised, the next rulers in the progression of history.

The attempt here was to show the relationship of change (ability to think critically and alternatively), to an active political and social existence. Plato and Aristotle sought to understand the world but in doing so they condoned the present mode of production under the present rule of the few or the minority over the majority. In Marx, we have a thinker who believed that your social positioning, including access to liberal education, went hand in hand with trying to change the world and/or society. This in reality was much more effective because of the basic nature of change and its relation to the mode of production. In other words, as long as someone is extracting profit from someone else, with very little profit for those being extracted from, there will be struggle and conflict, as reflected in class – but also in market place models of education. Plato and Aristotle have a universal character that is based on particular uses of their method, while in Marx; we can apply the whole analysis to virtually any given point or case in history and use that to effectively analyze society and the world to a greater extent. Marx understood the contributions made by ancients like Plato and Aristotle and he combined their social ethics with modern ideas of science and economics, which could go a long way to a more critical way of teaching today.



A Modern Economy of Education

In this section, I will consider models of education (market place and functional) that serve and cater to the goals of a capitalist economy. First, the working definitions of these models must be addressed in order to continue the illustration of the disparities between the whole notion of critical thinking and professional accreditation requirements. Market place demands on education are premised on notions of the business model as efficient and based on skill and competency. That is, an implicit trust in competition as the best form of strengthening and delivering a better education system. This of course undermines education as a process of learning to think creatively and alternatively. In the market place model, education is about exchangeability of labour – and people are simply commodities. As John F. Witte argues,

What would a pure education market produce? On the demand side, with families paying full costs, the total investment in education is likely to fall and, given various estimates of willingness to mortgage future incomes, fall substantially. Second, with demand being heavily dependent on income (which also conditions ability to borrow against future income), investment would be uneven between families and highly correlated with income.¹⁰

To consider the implications of market-place mentality on education is to ask about what being human means to us today. Concepts of freedom, rights, and happiness all compliment the ethos of democratic citizenship. The idea of an education system that merely reproduces workers offends our very notion of ‘personhood’ and education comes to be viewed as ideological manipulation. Namely, our subjectivity is constructed as compliant to the needs of the dominant market system in place.

Education as competitive behaviour creates personhood – but it is one that is insecure, divided, lacking in critical consciousness and reformulated as items of consumption. Mason also addresses this theme of unhappiness and alienation in his work on an *ethics of integrity*,



Modernity's secularizing and iconoclastic processes have produced what has been called the "disenchantment" of the world, which has in turn contributed to a diminished moral responsibility. ...Accompanying these developments, in large part because of the moral vacuum consequent on the disenchantment of traditional order and because of the immense power of modern technology, has been a rise in instrumental rationality, a kind of rationality that calculates the most economical or efficient means to a given end with scant regard for the human or other moral consequences.¹¹

The moral consequence of a market place education model is of course *estrangement*. Namely, our inability to self-recognize will be played out not only in the arena of education as a socializing process but also in how we perform at home, work, and in every other institution that we participate in for identity.

Here we can begin to ask about what kind of citizen emerges from an education system that views itself as a corporation. We must ask ourselves to reflect on a society where "student" and "product" become inter-changeable terms. In our modern, capitalistic societies, we have come to accept the dominate language of privatization and ownership in the material world as the norm. This 'norm' produces subjects that are regulated by access to commodities as their lifeline to freedom. 'To have' or 'not to have' marks us belonging or not belonging to the 'good' life. This shaping of consciousness is amplified in an education system that begins this type of thinking early on in the life of the individual and in the ethos of social perception. As the corporation/school raises the child, happiness becomes the means to consumption (including "the grade" as a thing to possess, not the end result of interacting and maturing with the subject matter at hand). Barlow and Robertson put it this way:

The commercialization of the classroom and the corporate intrusion into the education system are working very well. They are producing a generation of children who, as Ralph Nader describes them, are "growing up corporate." They are treated – and often see themselves – as consumers-in-training, pre-workers, future entrepreneurs. Such children ask few questions and do not challenge the culture of competitiveness.¹²



The wants our children have in an education system styled on free market is a ‘want’ that usually goes without a need or reflective act. They look at education but are not engaged with it. This surface understanding of what it means to “get an education” inevitably fails the majority of our youth as the corporate model of who is educated defines them and they willingly accept these labels without the creative and critical skills that would allow them to engage with and challenge this exploitation.

This falls in line with Mason’s luminous analysis of the consequences of modernity. Consider what ideas regarding community are placed at the center of a market driven education system as Mason outlines,

The excessively strong sense of individualism and the consequent withdrawal from commitment, the common acceptance of an instrumental approach to reason, the sense of a life given identity, value, and status in terms of the accumulation of consumer products and the pervasive devaluation of the worth of any deeper source of meaning, are all moral consequences of late modernity that influence young people, who are still developing their sense of identity, all the more impressively. The moral challenges of modernity are yet more critical in the lives of young people.¹³

The promise of modernity lies in its appeal to the rights of the individual: as human beings, we would like to assume that we are all unique individuals. To some extent this may be true but at the macro-sociological level, we understand that our identity is also shaped by the surroundings and community in which we cohabitate. Our education system is a continuation of this larger ethos and we as critical educators aim to see a progression of meaningfulness that is constantly re-examined and engaged with by our youth. However, within a market model of education we see a regression in critical and alternative thinking skills. The reduction of critical inquiry and construction of limited ways of seeing normalizes what is considered ‘education’. It is the ‘massaging over’ life that Nietzsche discusses in his works. That is it dis-invites critical reflection and mass-produces a type of thinking that does not reveal the complexity of human life.



The complexity of human life is part of the ethos revealed to us in an education system that is tied into the whole of existence (the integrity of education). It's in the gift of 'becoming human' that education shows its true significance. An education, that is, not founded in the functions or market of reproducing the system – but one founded in the humanness of allowing every avenue of reflection and debate left open to its social members. In Dottin et. all, this concern is clearly illustrated in the following:

It is not possible to discover the full value of academic freedom without asking about the value of intellectual freedom to inquire, express ideas and debate spheres of communication and education. Since these trends occurred once before in our century, we should ask about the ultimate effects they have had on intellectual freedom in general and academic freedom in particular. Since these trends culminated in fascism we should ask what formulations were given to intellectual and academic freedom at the time. How were these freedoms construed? What value was placed on them? This will clarify the nature of the choice before us today when we decide how much we value academic freedom¹⁴

And,

The extreme orientation toward careers and making money in today's society, with extreme consequences for what is offered as education, makes it hard to believe that education has often been a very different kind of activity. In the western world there have been academies, from the earliest times dedicated to the Greek ideal of character formation and human excellence (*arête*). The goal for the cultivation of judgment is the ability to temper one's judgments (*sophrosyne*), always seeking relevant evidence. With this conception, education becomes a many-sided process of development, cultivating the many sides of human beings so that they can appreciate considerations that have a bearing on fundamental choices as well as on immediate practical decisions. The goal of this educational process is directly at odds with the goal of restricting education to vocational and technical preparation. It is in the interest of people who prefer democracy to choose the more traditional educational ideal over the ideal that has prevailed recently in a period distinctly more materialistic and nationalistic than others.¹⁵

Here we recognize the urgency in revealing the dangers of a market-based approach to education. Not only is the idea of 'what is education' at stake but the very core of bringing up aware and caring citizens is in crisis. How is it that this functional model of education



operates? Clearly it seduces through its numbing of the population by dis-inviting us from the ability to think as it ‘wow’s’ and ‘dazzles’ us with education as entertainment and/or a stroll through the market to buy what we can and forget/not see the rest.

This reformulation of education represses any imagination that might allow for challenging the order of the day (capitalism). Since we are ‘born into Capitalism’ seeing the possibility of other becomes impossible when even the institution of education constructs this as unavailable or unreasonable. How do we as educators get students interested in being critically aware members when the world around them constructs this way of thinking as deviant or strange? The urgency here is to hold onto the traditional and democratic roots of ‘what it means to educate’ and allow these to challenge the modern narrative of education as a stepping-stone for your place in the market economy. If as Barlow and Robertson write, the only goal of education is about *raising the future workforce*, we as a society all lose. This type of *corporate culture* will eventually create an ethos dripping in the rights of the one over the rights of the group, extending well beyond the classroom boundaries. We will also come to feel this egotism at very level, and on every corner of human interaction:

Schools are being pressured to train students into this corporate culture, indoctrinating them in individual competitiveness and loyalty to company policy. Many are applying to the TQM model to the school. Says Doug Noble: “Above all, high-tech corporate interest in education reform expects a school system that will utilize sophisticated performance measures and standards to sort students and to provide a reliable supply of such adaptable, flexible, loyal, mindful, expendable, ‘trainable’ workers or the twenty-first century. This, at bottom, underlies the corporate drive to retool education and retool human capital.”¹⁶

This corporate pressure also produces youth who passionately defend what they are involved in – trying to get the high paying job – and neglects the type of thinking that will allow them to understand *why* they did not get that job or the leisure life promised.



If how we 'see' is regulated and the education process is a part of how we come to see, reflect, and understand, then we clearly need to challenge a model of education that privileges the bottom line. The market model of education deliberately constructs narratives of efficiency and success by appealing to the Capitalist ethos of competition and aggressiveness in getting ahead. As Capitalism is generally publicly approved, its ideas being used in running our education system tends to go seriously unchallenged. We 'approve' a system that values hard work and dedication by the individual. We 'approve' a system that regulates itself in order for the rest of us to get on with the pleasures it can afford. We don't think about those that do not succeed in this system as anything but 'not trying hard enough'. This type of regressive thinking is precisely what we cannot afford to approve of for the sake of our future society. What we have 'afforded' to live with these past decades cannot continue as more and more of our youth are becoming bored with life, with the social, and the meaninglessness they can't express in the Capitalist language we have offered them.

So what does the corporate model offer the realm of education? By treating education as a commodity, it offers our youth the false hope that maybe this commodity will give them some meaning or purpose in life. As Marx and countless others have shown us, commodity consumption cannot satisfy our search for meaning and happiness in life. If we offer this as a viable mean to understanding existence, we end up with a generation that is unable to express their values and desires in anything but a capitalistic language. This can lead to an incoherence and imbalance between what they are feeling and seek to express and a mode of expression that is limited in challenging and questioning the boredom and/or anxiety they feel in our culture. They learn to see education as the folder they bind their essays in rather than the meaning of the words written in it. They learn to barter and negotiate for their final grade rather than feel the human growth and maturation of working at a final grade.



The ethos built in a market based education system cannot sustain the overall social ethos of empathy and communal engagement that a traditional form of education offers its citizens (not consumers or products). This traditional form of education is deeply rooted in the making of the political citizen: today's youth as engaged with and interested in the future of civilization:

Democratic action also involves cooperation and the citizenship role. The essence of the cooperative relationship is two-way communication; it is possible only when individuals have purposes in common and recognize the need they have for each other. When cooperative and collaborative attitude exist, a group become active and pours its efforts into problem-solving activities. In both training and educational activities, people "...learn from experience that interdependence exists and that they are part of it. And thus they have consciousness of their citizenship role."¹⁷

For this reason the cultural formation of consciousness must be taken up in an ethos of progressive education. Namely, education as rooted in our multiple histories but always with its sights on the multiple possibilities for the future. This entails a clear understanding that an education system formulated through the eyes of capitalism alone will invite our youth to participate enthusiastically in seeing themselves as mere image or surface appearances. They will treat what it means to be human as the appearance of things rather than search for essence (the goal of the search, not the essence found or lost, as the true purpose of educating oneself). This in turn helps facilitate the order of consumption – where the 'appearance' of things takes on cultural appropriateness. The outcome being that we have to ask how our youth can take themselves seriously when they are produced and inevitably buy into these images of themselves.

Our difficulty as educators lies in challenging our students to see that the "norm" is not "natural". We at least still have our traditional sense of education as the making of the 'moral human being' (as chapter 6 will develop). Our biggest challenge is in 'de-normalizing' capitalist language in the classroom. A market based education system will not allow for this type of challenge as it is a significant partner in state control. As a tool



for popularizing the status quo, it cannot be critical of the power that feeds it. Corporations and governments working together to control the plights of their future workforce create market place education. This legitimating of the status quo is a real danger to the future of creative and critical thinkers as they are up against the power of hegemonic rule as it disseminates into the larger society:

Survival of the fittest is the message, but for public consumption, right-wing education reform must be couched in the language of excellence and achievement. This strategy promises to be just as effective as the efforts of the conservative alliance to manipulate our political consciousness and economic policies. Business has worked hard to convince Canadians that their interests are our interests; business invested a great deal in having the public see the deficits as the only issue of economic importance, and to convince the public of the inexhaustible opportunities presented by the Free Trade Agreement and NAFTA. And while many Canadians are distrustful of, if not hostile to these political motives of business, we seem unprepared to regard their sudden interest in the reform of schools with similar skepticism.¹⁸

This legitimization of business practices as the best tools to run our schools runs throughout our narratives of how best to bring up our young. These narratives are further legitimized in mass media regarding the education system that encourages passivity and/or uniform responses contained in the language of efficiency and free market analysis. With little time spent on engaging these issues, we as a society learn little from this lack of activity. Like an education system steeped in market allusions, our own understanding of this take-over of mind/education is no longer active and engaged as we simply channel the reproduced language and imagery of the status quo.

My intent in this section was to highlight and connect the type of interrupted learning that comes from the functional or market place model of education. Being critical is not part of the construction of a docile workforce. To do so would be to destroy the very idea of market place education from within. Note that the real danger of a market-styled education is the representation of the everyday life that this type of learning generates onto the larger society. This omnipresent and continual legitimization of market discourse in all



spheres of life leads to our inability to think along any other types and levels of imaginings. As our youth are 'sold' on education means getting a job or education is about survival of the most fit, we leave them with little access to the comprehension of education as a life long journey that may include a particular career but is so much more as we call on it to aid us through very human struggles throughout our lives. Education as developing character – one that can think and read beyond the surface or functional understandings of social institutions -- can allow for a, dare I say, happier and more aware population even at our darkest moments.

Re-thinking the value system inherent in a market place education is essential in making an argument against it running our educational institutions as a whole. What is at stake is the capacity for an ethos rich in human compassion, reason, and the ability to think clearly in times of trial and urgency. As technology further enhances our travels into the global (literally and metaphorically), we must encourage education as a human right to access its own understanding of freedom and humaneness. Control over what is learned and how it is learned (in the name of advancing capitalism, for example) can only end up turning on itself as its forced compliance weighs heavily on the human need to figure things out for themselves.



End Notes:

1. Porter, Jene M. *The Republic of Plato*. 75
2. Ibid. 116
3. Ibid. 487
4. Fischer, Ernst. *The Essential Marx*. 82
5. Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. 482
6. Marx, Karl. *The Communist Manifesto*. 103
7. Ibid. 102
8. Wood, Ellen Meiksins. 120
9. Ibid. 210
10. John Witte. *The Market Approach to Education*. 201-202
11. Mark Mason. *The Ethics of Integrity*. 30-31
12. Barlow and Robertson. *Class Warfare*. 85
13. Mark Mason. *The Ethics of Integrity*. 33-34
14. Dottin et. all. *Thinking About Education*. 2
15. Ibid. 11
16. Barlow and Robertson. *Class Warfare*. 89
17. Dottin et. all. *Thinking About Education*. 54
18. Barlow and Robertson. *Class Warfare*. 122

Biographical Note:

Noémia (Naomi) Couto's research interests are in law, justice and public policy, human rights, and international criminal law. Present focus is on child and youth rights in Canada. Has published *Violated and Silenced: The gendering of justice*, "On Justice and Education" in *Law and Criminal Justice: A Critical Inquiry*, "Oral History and the Struggle for Human Rights" in *Social Dislocation and the Lived Experience*, and "Paradox and Origin: On the Structure of Legal Communication" in the *International Journal of Criminology and Sociological Theory*.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arendt, Hannah. *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin Books, 1954.
- *The Human Condition*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959.
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis; Hackett, 1985.
- Baade, Hans W. (editor). *Academic Freedom: the Scholar's Place in Modern Society*. New York: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1964.
- Barlow, Maude and Heather Jane Robertson. *Class Warfare: The Assault on Canada's Schools*. Toronto: Key Porter Books Limited, 1994.
- Dottin, Erskine S. et al. *Thinking About Education: Philosophical Issues and Perspectives*. New York: University of America Press Inc., 1990.
- Fischer, Ernst. *The Essential Marx*. New York: Herder and Herder. 1970.
- Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. *Capital, Volume I*. New York: International Publishers, 1996.
- Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. In *Classics in Political Philosophy*. Jene M. Porter. Scarborough: Prentice-Hall. 1989.
- *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Penguin Books Ltd. 1967.
- Mason, Mark. *The Ethics of Integrity: A Defence of Core Ethical Principles for Education in Late Modernity*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. New York: Columbia University. 2000.
- Plato. *Collected Dialogues*. Edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961.
- Porter, Jene M. *The Republic of Plato*. Scarborough: Prentice-Hall. 1989.
- Witte, John F. *The Market Approach to Education: an analysis of America's first voucher program*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *Class, Ideology and Ancient Political Theory: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in Social Context*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1978.