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The Gig is Up:
Combating the Meanings of Education Proffered by Science, Technology, and Global Capitalism

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Colleagues in the academy seem to have a fascination with conceptual analysis and the term "education." Debates are held, papers are written, and symposia take place within which definitions are articulated and modulated. Whether the point is to provide narrative, stipulative, or programmatic definitions matters little to the larger point: the quest for the meaning of "education" continues. In their turns, schooling and training are contrasted with education in order to help clarify the differences in scope, purpose, and meaning of the various terms. The concepts are often qualified in discussions of literacy, socialization, and democracy, but why? Why are we still asking these questions? More to the point, why are we still asking these questions in light of the fact that the term is already operationalized and defined *for us*?

I submit that "education" has gone through a perverse ideological transformation: we recollect meanings of the term that no longer hold. Indeed, the concept "education" is introduced in very particular ways such that, over time, nobody notices the change in meaning that obtains.[1] Education for democratic engagement or civic responsibility is quaint, but no longer the point, if it ever was. Education as preparation for college makes the Committee of Ten recur to our minds, but even current tracking for college has less to do with learning traditional subject matter and more to do with competitive test preparation. Indeed, education now seems to mean training and this training is of a very particular kind: to be neo-classical *homo economicus*. The meaning of education has

already been decided, in other words, when economists snake their way into positions of power and influence. The discourse, the talk about education, ceases to be about anything other than human resource production, privatization, profit maximization, and the like. Such privatization, maximization, and production has many forms and we are given plenty of so-called "choices" in determining or deciding the label we wish to use to indicate our branded-reality (knowledge industry, school-to-work transitions, global economy, workforce readiness, school-business partnerships, etc.), but it all boils down to neo-classical economic theory as the engine driving the discourse that characterizes and determines what "education" means.

I want to clarify this point by distinguishing between two forms of economics. According to Gordon Bigelow, neoclassical economics and "post-autistic" economics are significantly different, with neoclassical economics currently the overwhelming economic view propagated in free-market cultures and imposed on schools.[2] Neoclassical economics

> tends to downplay the importance of human institutions, seeing instead a system of flows and exchanges that are governed by an inherent equilibrium. Predicated on the belief that markets operate in a scientifically knowable fashion, it sees them as self-regulating mathematical miracles, as delicate ecosystems best left alone.[3]

Accordingly, neoclassical economics positions itself as a science and claims objectivity in order to reify its standing and exert its power. When William Jevons made the case, in 1871, that economics was akin to physics, he elevated economics to an objective and value-free realm.[4] The problem, as Bigelow points out, is that "the laws of Newtonian mechanics, like any basic law of science, depend on the assumption of ideal conditions—e.g., the frictionless plane. In conceiving their discipline as a search for mathematical

laws, [neoclassical] economists have abstracted to their own ideal conditions, which for the most part consist of an utterly denuded vision of man himself [sic]."[5] What this underscores is a central fallacy of 21st century U.S. capitalism: that there *is* a free market—objectively standing—within which organizations (schools) would or do actually function. By reifying objectivism and value-neutrality, questionable premises and debatable assertions are only questionable and debatable by those who operate within the view that what they are debating are law-like propositions within a "scientific" realm. This point is perhaps better understood when connected to the positions put forward by neoclassical economics.

As Steve Cohn notes, neoclassical orthodoxy asserts five main claims:

> 1) Neoclassical economics is a scientific theory and as such demands belief in ways similar to modern physics; 2) Market outcomes reflect free choice; 3) People are naturally greedy, with insatiable consumer appetites. Capitalism is successful, in part, because it offers an incentive system that builds on this "human nature;" 4) The major purpose of economic theory is to promote economic efficiency and economic growth, as both provide a basis for human happiness; [and] 5) There is no alternative to capitalism. The failure of the former Soviet Union proves that socialism can't work. The message of the 20th century is "let (capitalist) markets work." The onus is on the government to justify "intervention" in the market.[6]

Schools, then, become a natural outgrowth of these five aspects of neoclassical economics and become subjected to an extension of the quest for certainty represented by standardized tests, packaged curricula, and tracking—each characteristic of reductionism and the business language of "efficiency" already permeating public education. For schools, a parallel analogy with Cohn goes something like this: 1) utilize the privileged status of "science" and statistics to support claims to and advance the assumption that "objective" and measurable data can be reliably derived from school settings in order to

generalize across space and time; 2) offer school vouchers and let the market decide which schools succeed and which schools "go out of business;" 3) students are naturally competitive and schools exist to prepare future workers for a technologically advanced, global (neoclassical) economy; 4) the major purpose of schools is to promote conformity to rules, subordination to authority, and efficient means of information-transfer from packaged curricula to students; and 5) there are many alternatives to public schools and they should be explored and supported. The failure of progressive or reconstructionist education shows that alternatives to public schools must be allowed in order for the free market to work. Given the relative ease by which the extension of neoclassical economics can be made to schools, we need an oppositional politics.

One economic theory that challenges neoclassical economics is post-autistic economics (PAE). PAE has its roots in a letter of protest written by students from the most prestigious rank of the French university system, the Grandes Écoles. The students were protesting that the theory of economics they were taught was out of touch and solipsistic. Writes Bigelow:

> PAE is the name now taken by those few economists who hope to rescue the discipline from the neoclassical model; the name is an homage to the dissident French students, whose manifesto called the standard model "autistic." It is a hilariously apt (albeit mildly offensive) diagnosis, and it could be just as well applied to *Homo economicus* himself, the economic actor envisioned by the neoclassical theory, who performs dazzling calculations of utility maximization despite being entirely unable to communicate with his fellow man.[7]

While all PAE economists do not dispense with everything neoclassical, PAE recognizes the social as a necessary feature in understanding economics. The characteristics of the social, then, involves human beings living together as a group in a situation in which their dealings with one another affect their common welfare; to be public means belonging to

or concerning the whole—of or by the community at large, that is, for the use and benefit of all. This is in contrast to the private, "objective," individualistic view that is closed, selfish, and away from public scrutiny.[8] The problem, however, is that the social elements characteristic of a public are subordinated in most schools to the will of pre-packaged curricula, corporatization, standardization, and "science."[9]

Schools suffer from neo-classical economics discourse because "production" and "provision" are commodified such that the evaluative criteria for judging schools in the first place (i.e., in determining that they are "failing" or "succeeding") are restricted to measurement standards that favor neoclassical analyses and thus business rationales. Teaching and learning, as a result, are reduced to processes of production and provision that must meet market goals of transfer efficiency and quality control. Such evaluations *necessarily* favor business interests and privatization efforts because the form of the measurements for learning ("standardized," "scientific," "objective"), are the same measurements used on durable goods and "hard" services. One problem is that when teaching and learning are reduced to the techniques and procedures that embrace market logics of this kind, they no longer qualify as teaching and learning.[10] They become production-line oriented processes of transmitted data, retainable by some students, but typically those students whose cultural capital is already valued in a consumerist, individualist, commodified classroom. To wit, is the practice of current schools different from neo-classical economics? Are we not faced with the strange reality that what we call schools are actually and already venues for future capital production? That is, where in schools are students encouraged to question the idea of schooling itself that is not caught up in the bait-and-switch of neoclassical, reductionist thinking? It is in this very

real sense of practical living that we see most clearly how (and acutely where) the gig is up. "Education" has already been defined, enacted, and enforced.

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[1] Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1975), 81-92.
[2] See Gordon Bigelow, "Let There Be Markets: The Evangelical Roots of Economics," *Harper's Magazine* 310, no. 1860 (May 2005): 33-38.
[3] Ibid., 34. See, also, Gordon Bigelow, *Fiction, Famine, and the Rise of Economics in Victorian Britain and Ireland*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Harvey Cox, "The Market as God," *The Atlantic Monthly* vol. 283, issue 3 (March 1999): 18*ff*.
[4] William Stanley Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1871).
[5] Bigelow, "Let There Be Markets," 37.
[6] Steve Cohn, "Common Ground Critiques of Neoclassical Principles Texts," *Post-Autistic Economics Review*, 18 (February 4, 2003), article 3. Available at http://wwwpaecon.net/PAEReview/issue18/Cohn18.htm. Accessed July 20, 2005. The claims Cohn identifies are actually subtexts within economics texts used in U.S. schools that characterize neoclassical economic theory. That Cohn found, in fact, that it is unlikely that less than 1% of students taking economics in U.S. schools use anything other than texts based on and asserting neoclassical principles.
[7] Ibid., 38. See, also, Edward Fullbrook, *The Crisis in Economics* (London: Routledge, 2003) and Edward Fullbrook, ed., *Intersubjectivity in Economics: Agents and Structures* (London: Routledge, 2001).
[8] *Webster's Desk Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1983).
[9] See, for example, National Research Council, *Scientific Research in Education*, eds. Richard J. Shavelson and Lisa Towne (Washington: National Academy Press, 2002).
[10] See Larry Cuban, *The Blackboard and the Bottom Line: Why Schools Can't Be Businesses* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).