

# Beyond neoliberalism: Reflections on capitalism and education

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## Abstract

Education within capitalism too often reproduces social and economic inequalities. Schools are depicted as failing and teachers are blamed. In this paper, I examine the discourses underlying this situation and the role of foundations in the US and the World Bank in developing countries in maintaining it. I look at the neoliberal remedy of privatization and the fundamental problems with capitalism. In conclusion, I consider alternatives to capitalism and within education.

## Keywords

Capitalism, socialism, neoliberalism, critical pedagogy

It has been 40 years since Bowles and Gintis (1977) wrote *Schooling in Capitalist America*. It has been even longer since Freire (1970) wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Carnoy (1974) wrote *Education as Cultural Imperialism*. The 1970s saw a slew of works critical of education under capitalism, among them: Apple (1979), Baudelot and Establet (1971), and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977). Looking at education under capitalism in earlier eras, revisionist historians have pointed to how education had long served capitalist ends by maintaining stratification and inequality (Katz, 2001; Spring, 1973). While many of these studies were criticized for over-emphasizing reproduction and not giving sufficient weight to the extent to which capitalism hegemony was challenged by contradictions, resistance, and agency (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1993; Au and Apple, 2009), it is significant to note that these works were written before the neoliberal turn in economics and politics. With the onset of neoliberal capitalism in 1980s and subsequent years, many studies have examined the problematic nature of associated educational reforms (Apple, 2006; Bale and Knopp, 2012; Hill and Kumar, 2009; Hursh, 2016). Sometimes, today, we forget the extent to which capitalism has always been a problem for education.

In this paper, I reflect on some aspects of this history of capitalism and education, focusing mainly on the neoliberal era. I begin, however, by looking at an earlier period

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which established two underlying refrains of the neoliberal era: schools are failures, and it is the fault of teachers. This is followed by looking at the dominant discourses used to support these and other capitalist themes. Next, I examine two of the chief purveyors of these discourses and reforms: US foundations and the World Bank. Then, I consider one of the main neoliberal reforms posed: the privatization of education and other social services. This takes me to the fundamental issue of what is wrong with capitalism. I next examine alternatives to capitalism and alternatives to neoliberal education. To conclude, I look briefly at the difficulties of the struggle to transform capitalism and education and at what might be possible.

## Schools are failures and teachers are to blame

Immediately following World War II, in the US and elsewhere, there was often a sense of optimism about modernization and development in general and about the role of schools in particular. War-torn countries could recover and newly independent nations could progress without having to repeat the long, slow transformation of the industrialized world. Education would be a great contributor to rapid progress everywhere.

As early as the 1960s, there was already disillusionment with the lack of rapid progress in both developed and developing nations.<sup>1</sup> In education, in the US this was reinforced by the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) which collected and analyzed nationwide data, concluding that student achievement was primarily determined by family background, not school resources. In the 1970s, this was seconded by another major study by Jencks et al. (1975) which reported the lack of impact of education on income and employment as well as on student achievement. Despite significant criticisms of both studies and their conclusions, they have been used to this day to support a more tempered and pessimistic view of the potential of schooling to effect change.

This tempered view of the impact of schooling has co-existed with a somewhat contradictory call for sweeping reform of education as a way to improve both the achievement and life chances of children. This was very much evident in the 1983 US federal government-sponsored report, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The report ushered in the attack on teachers and schools that has characterized the neoliberal era, and not just in the US. *A Nation at Risk* argued that the US was behind other economies in the early 1980s, most notably Japan, and that the culprit was our educational system. The opening lines of the report said:

Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world... If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. [p. 9]

As one wag said at the time, it was a repeat of Sputnik's instigation of educational reform in the 1950s to compete with the Soviet Union—but, instead, it was as if Japan had launched a Toyota into orbit and the US schools once again were blamed for falling short. Of course, if the US educational system was in any way to blame for poor economic performance, perhaps the focus should have been on the nation's business schools, where short-run profits were emphasized over long-run performance.

This mix of critique of public schools and attack on teachers has been characteristic of the neoliberal era, not just in the US, but worldwide. I do not mean to single out the Coleman

Report and *A Nation at Risk* as the cause of this critique and attack, although they were influential. More accurately, I see them as harbingers of changing times. Globally, they were reflections of a number of underlying dominant discourses.

## Dominant discourses

Even in today's neoliberal era, it is recognized that capitalism is faced with significant problems, what some have called the "triple challenge": job creation, poverty elimination, and inequality reduction (Motala and Vally, 2014).<sup>2</sup> The dominant response to these problems has given us one principal answer to all three problems: *the lack of individual skills*. This response has been embedded in a number of intersecting and overlapping global discourses.<sup>3</sup>

The *mismatch discourse* goes back at least to the 1950s, and probably long before that. In it, education has been blamed for not supplying the skills business needs, that is, education is blamed for the mismatch between what education produces and what business wants. Unemployment, in general, is put at education's door, more broadly arguing that education is not teaching what the economy needs. It is, unfortunately, true that many children and youth around the world leave school without basic skills necessary for life and work. But the mismatch discourse is usually less about basic skills and more about vocational skills. The argument, while superficially plausible, is not true for at least two reasons. First, vocational skills, which are often context specific, are generally best taught on the job. Second and, fundamentally, unemployment is not a worker supply problem but a structural problem of capitalism. There are three or more billion un- or under-employed people on this planet, not because they don't have the right skills but because full employment is neither a feature nor a goal of capitalism.

Underlying this mismatch/skills discourse is the *human capital discourse* (Klees, 2016a). In the 1950s and earlier, the neoclassical economics framework that underpins capitalist ideology and practice could not explain labor. While the overall neoclassical framework was embodied in mathematical models of a fictitious story of supply and demand by small producers and consumers, it was not clear how to apply that to issues of labor, work, and employment. Instead, in that era, labor economics was more sociological and based on the real world, trying to understand institutions like unions and large companies, and phenomena like strikes, collective bargaining, and public policy. The advent of human capital theory in the 1960s offered a way to deal with labor in terms of supply and demand (mostly supply), as a commodity like any other. This took the sociology out of labor economics. Education was seen as investment in individual skills that made one more productive and employable. While this supply-side focus is sometimes true, it is very partial, at best. That is, abilities like literacy, numeracy, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, etc., can have a payoff in the job market, but *only* in a context where such skills are valued. The more useful and important question is the demand-side one, usually ignored by human capital theorists, regarding how can we create good jobs that require valuable skills. The human capital discourse also generally ignores the value of education outside of work. In fact, contrary to the hype, the human capital discourse, and offshoots of it, like the "Knowledge Economy," have been one of the most destructive ideas of the modern era.<sup>4</sup> Solving the triple challenge of poverty, inequality, and jobs has been unproductively directed to lack of individual skills and education instead of to capitalist and other world system structures whose very logic makes poverty, inequality, and lack of employment commonplace.

Underlying the human capital discourse, most directly since the 1980s, has been the *neoliberal discourse*. This is tied to neoclassical economics. From the 1930s to the 1970s, in various countries, a liberal neoclassical economics discourse predominated which recognized some of the inefficiencies and inequalities inherent in capitalism and argued the need for substantial government interventions as a corrective. With political shifts exemplified by Reagan in the US, Thatcher in the UK, and Kohl in Germany, a neoliberal neoclassical economics discourse took over, which argued that capitalism was both efficient and equitable, that problems were generally minor, and that the culprit of any problems was too much government interference. In fact, government failure was seen as fundamental, so that even if there were significant problems with the market system, government would not be able to remedy them. Neoliberal economics has led to “structural adjustment programs” that promote cuts in government spending and taxes, privatization of public services, deregulation of business, liberalization of markets, and lessening of protection for workers. This discourse has gone beyond economics and has political, social, and cultural dimensions (Harvey, 2005).

In education, neoliberalism has led to a sea change in discourse and policy. During the 1960s and 1970s, there was attention focused on the inequities and inequalities of education, the marginalization of many people around the world, and the need for substantially more resources to be devoted to all levels of education. Starting in the 1980s, the emphasis was on narrow views of efficiency more than equity, implemented through narrow versions of accountability focused on testing and measurement. Basic problems of public schools have been ignored; instead, policies promoted market solutions through private schools, vouchers, charters, and the like (Klees, 2008a, 2008b, 2016a).

When attention was paid to public schools, almost every reform was focused on governance—reorganization, restructuring, re-engineering, knowledge management, merit pay, reform civil service laws, community involvement, decentralization, increase testing, vouchers, privatization, output-based aid, results-based finance, etc. For decades, there was almost never an educational reform recommended that would cost much money. Often, the explicit objective of the reform was to cut costs—cut teacher salaries, cut back on teacher pre-service education, substitute distance education, privatize, charge user fees. Occasionally, there was a recommendation to spend a little more money—for textbooks, for girls’ education—but resource shortfalls remained enormous.

While the left is often criticized, falsely, for an economic determinism, the right, in the discourses above, practices its own version of economic determinism: education leads to skills, skills lead to employment, employment leads to economic growth, economic growth creates jobs and is the way out of poverty and inequality. Decades of unsuccessful neoliberal reforms have shown this to be untrue.

## **Who are the purveyors?**

Who translates these discourses into education policy? There are a lot of players—governments, multilateral and bilateral donors, foundations, universities, think tanks, NGOs, the private sector, and others. We live in a world system that increasingly sings one tune, neoliberalism. So it is difficult to separate who has the power to significantly influence policy. Moreover, neoliberal discourses have become the new common sense; they pervade the policy air we breathe and so dominate the policy agenda worldwide. Here, I wish to highlight the work of private foundations in the US and the World Bank in developing countries.

### *Billionaire Boys Club*

Private foundations like Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller have long been influential in education in the US and elsewhere. But, in the past, these foundations had less of an agenda of their own and generally responded to relatively open calls for proposals. By the early 2000s, that changed, as what Ravitch (2010) called the Billionaire Boys Club—the troika of three foundations, Broad, Gates, and Walton—developed and followed a neoliberal education policy agenda (also see Barkan, 2011).

The three foundations come from very successful private enterprises: Broad from homebuilding and insurance, Gates from Microsoft, and Walton from Walmart. These venture philanthropists, or philanthrocapitalists as they are sometimes called, favored competition, choice, charters, incentive pay for teachers, results-based finance, intensive testing of students, etc. All three have been extraordinarily influential in the Obama administration, and many people associated with these foundations received high-level policy positions, including Arne Duncan as US Secretary of Education. They also have influenced many school districts by offering a little sorely needed discretionary money to the districts' over-stretched budgets.

Broad's philosophy is that “schools should be redesigned to function like corporate enterprises” and that “neither school superintendents nor principals need be educators” (Ravitch, 2010: 217). Barkan (2011) concludes:

Certainly, ideology – in this case, faith in the superiority of the private business model – drives [all three]... But so does the blinding hubris that comes from power.

These foundations are rarely challenged or criticized. Frederick Hess (2005: 9–11) of the right-wing American Enterprise Institute argues that “academics, activists, and the policy community live in a world where philanthropists are royalty” leading to a “conspiracy of silence” about their faults. Ravitch (2013: 317–318) concludes that these and other foundations have essentially “hijacked” US education policy.

### *The World Bank*

No one has been more responsible for spreading the neoliberal education reform agenda to developing countries than the World Bank (Klees et al., 2012). The Bank, as they call themselves, began lending for education in the 1960s, becoming the single largest international aid agency funder for education by the 1980s. While the vast bulk of educational costs are borne by country governments themselves, the Bank provides countries with some of the little discretionary finance they have and so has become enormously influential.

The World Bank is a monopoly. There is no other institution like it. UNESCO used to have a more dominant role in education, but withdrawal of the US and UK contributions for a number of years forced it to play a much more minor role, and the World Bank became the true director of the Education for All (EFA) processes and more (Jones, 2007; Mundy, 2002). While the World Bank pretends everyone—countries, bilaterals, multilaterals, civil society, and more—is in partnership with it, it is the World Bank which takes the lead on education policy. With its periodic strategy reports and a virtual juggernaut of research done internal to the World Bank or financed by it, it greatly influences the global directions for education policy, backed by conditional grant and loan money that ensures countries follow those directions (Klees et al., 2012).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Bank took a more liberal view of education policy. It routinely argued that there were vast inequalities in education and that public education needed substantial additional resources which should be provided through expanded progressive taxes. Starting in the 1980s, the Bank's ideology was rapidly transformed to a neoliberal perspective. While the lack of sufficient resources was occasionally mentioned as an issue, it was always with a "yes, but" —where the "but" was that the main issue was seen as inefficient use of existing resources and neoliberal remedies would make resource use more efficient.

For decades, the Bank has downplayed its role in lending money, trying to position itself as the "Knowledge Bank," the repository of best practice. This is arrogant and frightening. The Bank basically only looks at its own research and that of its adherents, basing its one-size-fits-all recommendations on ideology, not evidence (Klees et al., 2012). Even the idea of a central repository of "best practice" is frightening in a world where best practice is always contested. The World Bank as that repository is more frightening still.

The World Bank selects and interprets the research that fits with its ideology. In this sense, it resembles right-wing ideological think tank institutions like the Cato Institute or the Heritage Foundation in the US. However, it differs in two important ways. First, everyone realizes Cato and Heritage are partisan. The World Bank, on the other hand, makes a pretense of objectivity and inclusiveness. Second, Cato and Heritage are private institutions with limited influence. The World Bank is a public institution, financed by taxes, which gives grants, loans, and advice around the world, yielding a vast global influence.

There is no "Knowledge Bank," only an "Opinion Bank," and, worse still, an opinion bank with monopoly power. This Monopoly Opinion Bank (I cannot resist—it should be known as The MOB) may not be the only source of knowledge in education in developing countries, but it is the predominant producer and arbiter of what counts as knowledge. If there were applicable anti-trust legislation, The MOB's research enterprise would be broken up. The MOB's defense is that they try to incorporate all knowledge from all their partners, including countries, other aid agencies, NGOs, other civil society organizations, indigenous people, the poor of the world, etc. This is neither possible nor sensible nor true in a world where knowledge is contested within and among all these groups. The MOB distills and disseminates the knowledge it wants to promulgate.<sup>5</sup>

While loan officers in the Bank are more pragmatic than the policy and research staff, internally and externally Bank ideology pervades practice. Even some Bank staff complain of the (neoliberal) "thought police" in the Bank that force ideological conformity (Broad, 2006). And, like the philanthropists in the US, Bank staff in the world of international aid agencies are royalty. They rarely have to face serious criticism or challenges. Again, I do not see the Bank as responsible for neoliberalism, but they have taken it as gospel and have become its chief purveyor in education in developing countries.

## **What is being sold: Privatization**

As above, there are a number of dimensions to global neoliberal education reform. Here I want to focus on one of the most significant and disturbing: the privatization of education (Verger et al., 2016). We have seen more than three decades of a continually increasing effort to promote the privatization of education. By privatization, I mean efforts to diminish public control and finance of education, thus including user fees, charters, vouchers, private

schooling, public–private partnerships (PPPs), reliance on business know-how, and the like (Klees, 2008a).

Privatization is based on two things: first, ideology, not evidence; and second, greed.

What is behind this ideology and greed? The answer for me is neoliberal capitalism—or perhaps capitalism in any form.

Let me start with a story. Some years ago, I attended a meeting about health policy at the World Bank. The World Bank presenter pointed out how, in many poor countries, poor people chose to be treated at private health clinics for a fee instead of going to free public clinics. This “voting with their feet”—as economists like to call it—was touted as evidence of the success and value of privatization. To the contrary, I pointed out that this is simply evidence of the success of 30+ years of neoliberal ideology in which public health clinics had been systematically decimated, ending up without doctors, nurses, or medicine. The same has happened in education, most especially in developing countries. Thirty+ years of neoliberal policies have often left public schools over-crowded, with poorly trained teachers, few learning materials, dilapidated facilities, and often not close by. It is no wonder that some parents opt out. However, while it is rational for disadvantaged individuals to sometimes send their children to private schools, it is poor public policy—it serves only a few, it increases inequality, it ignores the public interest, it neglects public schools, and it devalues teachers. Privatization is said to meet the growing education gap (which resulted from years of attack on the public sector), but all it does is replace an attempt to develop good public policy with the vagaries of charity or the narrow-mindedness of profit-making.

Let me turn to greed.

Privatization, and especially PPPs, represent a huge business opportunity. Globally, private education is perhaps a \$50–\$100 billion dollar business right now. Education as whole, public and private, is a \$4+ trillion industry. Business’ eyes light up with these dollar signs. Even the market for the poorest people in the world is seen as a huge business opportunity—referred to as the “bottom billions” market (Ball, 2012).

In the latest phase of neoliberal capitalism, the world is being turned into one big PPP, and this is especially evident in the plans for infrastructure megaprojects (Alexander, 2015; Bretton Woods Project, 2016). The biggest expense for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be infrastructure megaprojects for pipelines, dams, water and electricity systems, and roads. It is estimated that an additional \$70 trillion in infrastructure will be needed by 2030—what has been called the “biggest investment boom in human history.” The modus operandi according to the United Nations for these megaprojects will be PPPs. The SDGs can easily turn into a welfare program for business, “privatizing gains and socializing losses on a massive scale”—as critics of these PPPs point out.

The long-run goals of business are sobering. The grandiose Global Redesign Initiative proposed by the World Economic Forum (2010) at Davos in 2010 essentially wants to turn the UN itself into a giant PPP, with business being formal partners in global governance along with States and other stakeholders (Hickel, 2015; also see Olmedo, 2016). This is the frightening context in which PPPs in education are being promoted.

This broader context of privatization is important for our struggles in education:

- This broader ideology and reality of PPPs legitimizes their spread in education;
- PPPs in infrastructure megaprojects will likely absorb funds that should be destined to social services like education and health; and

- The struggle against PPPs in other sectors offers an opportunity for those of us in education to join with others in common cause.

In a past life, I went to Stanford Business School. There, I had a professor who wrote a paper entitled, “The Social Responsibility of Business and Other Pollutants of the Air.” He was very pro-business; his point was that the business of business was business, and we shouldn’t want or expect them to help solve problems that are fundamentally government’s. Business should not be a partner, should not be at the advice or governance table, should not be a part of the Global Partnership for Education, for instance. There is also a moral bottom line—the provision of education (and health) should not be oriented towards making money.

Privatization used to be a hard sell in education since everyone knew that private schooling catered to the well-to-do. Nowadays, the neoliberal education establishment is touting so-called “low-fee private schools” (LFPS) for the poor (Tooley 2009, 2016). Given the decimation of public schooling under neoliberalism, as above, LFPS have sprung up to take advantage of parents’ dissatisfaction. While some of these are started by parents, teachers, and communities, more and more we are seeing big business enter the market of trying to make a profit off the “bottom billions.” Studies have shown that these private schools are often of very low quality. And the fees are not so low; many poor families cannot afford them, and, those that do, make invidious choices about which child to send to school, often favoring boys, or about choosing between feeding their family and schooling (Macpherson, 2014; Srivastava, 2013). LFPS further stratify education and violate many international treaties and conventions that guarantee free basic schooling. What kind of world is it where we consider it legitimate to charge the poorest people in the world for basic education? Answer: A capitalist world!

### **What’s wrong with capitalism?**

While the answer to this question could and has filled many books, I wish to make a few points here. Capitalism diverts attention from structural issues by casting the blame for education and development problems elsewhere. Mismatch, human capital, and neoliberal discourses first and foremost blame individuals for their lack of “investment” in human capital, for their not attending school, for their dropping out of school, for their not studying the “right” fields, for their lack of entrepreneurship (Klees, 2016a). Educational policymakers in developing countries are likewise often blamed for their “poor” decisions, meaning decisions that run counter to neoliberal dogma, such as investing in higher education. Often policymakers in developing countries who make economic and social policy are also blamed for either being corrupt or not following neoliberal prescriptions: labor is seen to receive too much protection, government interferes too much in the market, and business does not receive the support it needs. Education itself is also a wonderful *scapegoat* for politicians, researchers, World Bank staff, and others because education can’t be expected to fix the problem for many years, so they will never be held accountable for their advice.

Nowhere, of course, does the right see the inherent problems in the nature of capitalism nor does it even recognize neoliberalism. After the fall of the Soviet Union, right-wing books proclaimed the end of history, the end of ideology (Fukuyama, 2006): Margaret Thatcher’s famous TINA—There is No Alternative to capitalism! We now have the one best system, and we just have to tinker with it and wait for prosperity to sweep the globe. Well, how long



are we willing to wait? While millions are suffering and dying and the rich get obscenely rich at the expense of the rest of us (Klees, 2016b; Piketty, 2014)? In my view, there's reason to believe that even if we wait 100 years we will still be facing the same problems, because the "one best system" is turning out to be the one worst system. It has become commonplace to recognize that capitalism has increased material production and wealth, even Marx did, but production for whom? Wealth for whom? The most obscene statistic I've heard is that the 62 richest individuals on the planet have the same total wealth as the poorest 3.5 billion people on the planet (Oxfam, 2016).<sup>6</sup>

Has capitalism been useful? For whom? At what cost? Ecological insanity? Pervasive inhumanity? As the late South African activist and intellectual, Neville Alexander, said: "Once the commodity value of people displaces their intrinsic human worth or dignity, we are well on the way to a state of barbarism" (quoted in Motala and Vally, 2014: 1). Motala and Vally (2014: 16) talk of the "searing tribulations...of extreme inhumanity"—such as slavery, colonialism, Nazism, Apartheid. Will capitalism be seen as another example? If things do not change radically, I think so. I think that one day the capitalist system of wage labor will be seen as evil, only one step removed from slavery.<sup>7</sup> The severely unequal distribution, the fact that the most difficult labor on earth, for example, cutting sugar cane, is paid only \$2–\$3 a day while others get millions, will be seen as criminal, a labor market system for which no one takes responsibility and which is disguised by the rhetoric of freedom.<sup>8</sup>

We need to be very cognizant of the forces arrayed against progressive change. The left has long been criticized by the right as conspiracy theorists. The response of the left has been there is no need to posit a conspiracy; neoliberalism and capitalism are promoted and enforced by structures that operate at the world system level (Wallerstein, 2004). This is quite true, and I don't see these structures as the result of some secret cabal. Nevertheless, while reference to the "ruling class" may be anachronistic, many of today's global business and political elite know each other well and meet regularly through organizations like the World Economic Forum and the Trilateral Commission. How many have even heard of the latter? In it are the most influential politicians and industrialists in the world, and it has been meeting in secret for decades. Neoliberal capitalist policies are promoted and even coordinated by an elite class of like-minded individuals who think that governments are overvalued and business solutions undervalued and act in concert. We must not underestimate our opponents. As Warren Buffet has said: "It's class warfare" and "My class is winning." I don't think of all this as a conspiracy to do harm. I believe that most of these people are well-intentioned. They are simply wrong, believing in a neoliberal economics that makes them better off but leaves the majority of humanity in dire straits.

Can capitalism be improved, be fair and just? I am not clairvoyant, I can't see the future. I have some progressive colleagues who believe that capitalism can be tamed in the broader social interest, like, some would say, in some places, it began to be tamed in the 1960s and 1970s. I wish it were so, but I don't think so. The greed, inequality, and environmental destruction promoted by capitalism, the racism and sexism that capitalism takes advantage of, are all extraordinarily resistant to change. Governments today, captured by elites and by the unequal logic inherent in our world system, can only with great difficulty offer significant challenges. So taming and humanizing capitalism, in my view, is not likely. Therefore, I see transforming capitalism as the name of the game. While this will not be easy, I see very real possibilities.

## Alternatives to capitalism

In 1933, John Maynard Keynes wrote:

[Capitalism] is not a success. It is not intelligent, it is not beautiful, it is not just, it is not virtuous – and it doesn't deliver the goods. In short, we dislike it, and we are beginning to despise it. But when we wonder what to put in its place, we are extremely perplexed. (Quoted in Albert, 2014: xv)

This pessimism about viable alternatives to capitalism continues to today. However, for about the past 20 years, I have been fortunate enough to teach a course I call “Alternative Education, Alternative Development.” When I began teaching the course, I had to search for good exemplars of alternative thinking and practice; nowadays, there are a plethora. Contrary to TINA, Bollier (2015: xii) proposes that the “more accurate acronym for our time is TAPAS – ‘There are plenty of alternatives.’” I agree. In fact, there is such a large and recent literature on alternatives, that in this section (on capitalism) and the next (on education), I can only try to give a sense of some of what is out there. This is not to say that there are clear system-wide alternatives to capitalism. As most of these authors point out, there are no blueprints. What there are are many small-scale exemplars and intriguing visions of what larger-scale alternatives might look like.

Socialism is the principal label associated with an alternative to capitalism. Marx had hardly anything to say about socialism or communism, and the USSR and China are seen by very few on the left as progressive or sensible alternatives. Socialism in Europe or the Global South perhaps more so but, of course, all of these countries are embedded in a capitalist world system, and most can be seen as capitalist but with a stronger interventionist government that tempers inequalities and sometimes provides greater voice for disadvantaged groups. Most of those who write about socialism as an alternative to capitalism today recognize that there are many versions of socialism. Wright (2010) discusses seven: “statist socialism, social democratic economic regulation, associational democracy, social capitalism, social economy, cooperative market economy, and participatory socialism” (p. 368). Kovel (2014) argues that concern with severe environmental threats make developing an “ecosocialism” the only way to a desirable future (also see Daly, 1996; Klein, 2014; Korten, 2015).

While different socialisms can be described differently, many would agree with Wright (2010: 369) that an essential part of a progressive definition emphasizes “democratic power over the allocation and use of productive resources.” Many would also emphasize that widespread, democratic participation is a necessary feature. Perhaps the most detailed vision of a socialism that does not rely on capitalist market mechanisms has been developed over many years by two political economists, Michael Albert (2014) and Robin Hahnel (2005). They call their system “parecon,” short for a “participatory economy” or “participatory economics.” In it, the economy allocates work and goods through multilevel workers’ councils and consumer councils. Most writers do not go quite this far and still rely on a market system to allocate goods and services and employment opportunities. The hallmark of most of these visions, though, is a major change in capitalist and corporate organization in the form of moving from a hierarchical, authoritarian structure to a much more democratic workplace and more participatory politics (Albert, 2014; Hahnel, 2005; Schweikart, 2002).

Somewhat in contrast with these visions for a new type of socialism is the work of Gar Alperovitz (2013) and colleagues who, mostly with reference to the United States, see a slow

but growing transformation of capitalism happening right now.<sup>9</sup> Alperovitz doesn't disagree with some of the visions of people like Albert (for an interesting dialog between them, see Alperovitz and Albert, 2014) but thinks that practically it is more immediately useful to build on what we have:

I've called the model for what this might plausibly look like in practice "the pluralist commonwealth": commonwealth because it seeks transitionally to restructure political reality by democratizing the ownership of wealth, pluralist because it embraces a variety of institutional approaches toward that end...[T]he model is designed to make maximal use of actual on-the-ground forms of democratized ownership – the millions of employee-owners, the thousands of community development corporations and cooperatives that already exist in the US serve as a key starting point. (Alperovitz and Albert, 2014)

Many authors pay a lot of attention to smaller-scale alternatives that are cropping up around the world as both harbingers of what may come and as indicators of what might be further developed. The "participatory budgeting" initiatives that started in Brazil, but has spread to other countries, are often discussed (Hahnel, 2005; Wright, 2010). Participatory budgeting has been done in small communities as well as very large cities (Sao Paulo) where hundreds of thousands of citizens have been involved. Through a series of meetings, it allows citizens to determine the allocation of some portion of municipal budgets. Other innovative alternatives or ideas that have been heralded include: the very large Mondragon worker-owned cooperative in Spain; "Ithaca Hours" and other forms of local currency or non-monetary exchange systems; basic income guarantees; producing Wikipedia; self-help community organization; and the Quebec social economy for childcare and eldercare (Hahnel, 2005; Sandbrook, 2014; Wright, 2010). Solidarity economics examines connected cooperative organizations that have sprung up in many places, and a growing literature exists on small and extended communities' efforts to regulate the "Commons" (Satgar, 2014, Wall, 2015; also see Gibson-Graham (2006) for a related feminist vision).

Another oft-discussed alternative to capitalist organization comes out of the Zapatista movement. What started as an armed insurrection in opposition to NAFTA specifically, and neoliberal capitalism more broadly, has turned into a large-scale rural, communal, indigenous, participatory alternative development system (Esteva et al., 2013). Similarly, the Landless Movement in Brazil offers an alternative, very participatory approach to rural development (Tarlau, 2015). (Both also offer alternative approaches to education, as I will mention in the next section.) Thoughtful attention has also been focused on the need to look to the development of the left in the Global South and to alternative epistemologies there that can be a basis for progressive change (Sandbrook, 2014; Sousa Santos, 2014).

Latin America has been looked to for half-a-dozen or more recent elections of leftist presidents. Some are discouraged that these countries have not been able to do more to forge an alternative path and that some are turning back to center or right politics. But that is not surprising given these countries are embedded in a hostile capitalist world. The hostility and aggression faced by Cuba in the 1960s, Chile in the 1970s, Nicaragua in the 1980s, and Venezuela more recently show that the struggle for alternatives will be very difficult. But around the world, electoral politics are yielding some changes, even in the West: Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, and Bernie Sanders in the US. It is astounding that some polls in the US showed that if Trump and Sanders had been the two nominees for president, perhaps over half of the US voting population would actually have favored a self-declared democratic socialist!

One of the most interesting and rather large-scale efforts to promote alternative development is the World Social Forum (WSF). The WSF was initiated in 2001 as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum held in Davos each year. The WSF brings together tens of thousands of activists from around the globe who meet to share and explore alternatives related to education, housing, the environment, health, transportation, food, and capitalism more generally. Participants return home and network with millions more. Sousa Santos (2008: 252) calls the WSF the “most consistent manifestation of counterhegemonic globalization.” He goes on to say that Walden Bello was right to argue that WSF organizers and participants had

the realization they needed one another in the struggle against global capitalism and that the strength of the fledgling global movement lay in a strategy of decentralized networking that rested not on the doctrinal belief that one class was destined to lead the struggle but on the reality of common marginalization of practically all subordinate classes, strata, and groups under the reign of global capital. (Bello, quoted in Sousa Santos, 2008: 264)

None of these writers who describe practical alternatives and possible visions of alternatives to capitalism are deterministic, dogmatic, or doctrinaire, as the left is often caricatured. As I said earlier, they offer no blueprints or grand designs, which, as Chomsky (2014: ix) says, would be an “act of hubris . . . usurp[ing] the rightful role of future citizens in determining their own lives and relations.” The future will and needs to be determined by struggle and by democratic deliberation. Most of these authors see the many social movements around the world as a principal mechanism for progress, for actually developing and implementing alternatives to capitalism, movements such as: the anti/alter-globalization movement, the women’s movement around the world, the climate justice movement, the Landless Movement in Brazil, the Dalit movement in India, labor movements, the Arab Spring, Occupy around the globe, the Indignados in Spain, anti-austerity in Europe, the civil rights movement in the US, and many others.

While this paper has focused on capitalism and education, I along with many others see the need to tackle the intersection of capitalism with other oppressive structures like patriarchy, racism, heterosexism, and ableism (Adams et al., 2013; Andersen and Collins, 2012; Hooks, 2000; Saunders, 2002). This is key to understanding the nature of marginalization in today’s world system. It is also key to praxis. We must work together across social movements. This is a struggle for the long haul, and it has to be fought on multiple fronts. This doesn’t mean we have to lose a focus on education, but we have to join in these broader struggles. Let me turn now to how alternative approaches to education can confront capitalist and other oppressive intersecting structures.

## **Alternative education**

The left has been criticized as long on critique but short on alternatives. As above, this is not true of examining alternatives to capitalism. Nor is it true for alternatives to education. Andre Gorz (1967) wrote of non-reformist reforms, that is, reforms that challenged underlying oppressive structures, not simply offering superficial reformist changes. But what constitutes a non-reformist education reform from a left progressive view? One can never be sure, as capitalism and other world system structures are very resilient and coopt many reforms—so what turns out to be a real alternative will best be seen over the

longer haul. That being said, the principal alternatives to capitalist education come from the many efforts to elucidate the theory and praxis of critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy has its origins in the extraordinary work of Paulo Freire, although many earlier alternatives that challenge capitalism and other oppressive structures can be found (Apple et al., 2009). While definitions and characteristics are debated, sometimes vigorously, Apple et al. (2009: 3) open their exposition with:

Critical pedagogy... broadly seeks to expose how relations of power and inequality, (social, cultural, economic), in their myriad forms, combinations, and complexities, are manifest and challenged in the formal and informal education of children and adults... In addition, a more robust understanding of critical pedagogy... is based increasingly in a realization of the importance of the multiple dynamics underpinning the relations of exploitation and domination in our societies. Issues surrounding the politics of redistribution (exploitative economic processes and dynamics) and the politics of recognition (cultural struggles against domination in our societies and struggles over identity), hence, need to be jointly considered.

I do not have the space to delve into the many debates about the theory and praxis of critical pedagogy but will highlight a few points. For most advocates, critical pedagogy is not a method, but a broad, evolving framework (Kincheloe, 2007). One salient disagreement is about how much attention to focus on what happens within the classroom:

Taking a narrow view on Freire's theory might... lead one to believe that the ability to engage in progressive "educational projects" is the best we can hope for – the idea that the most we can do is effect change in our own classrooms and empower students, one at a time, primarily in terms of how we teach them. (Johnstone and Terzakis, 2012: 197)

McLaren (2000: 193) offers some agreement for attention beyond the classroom:

[C]ontemporary critical pedagogy needs to rescue Freire's work from the reformists who wish to limit his legacy to its contribution to consciousness-raising [in the classroom].

The central issue here is the extent to which teachers and students engaging in critical pedagogy confine their activities to the classroom vs. the extent to which they engage in the broader struggles against capitalism and other oppressive structures in their community, as well as the nation and the world.

Regardless of the position taken on this debate, what happens within the classroom and school system is, of course, a central part of critical pedagogy. Moreover, critical pedagogy comes in many forms, often without the critical pedagogy label but explicitly or implicitly drawing on its concepts. For example, there is a lot of attention focused on social justice education. Picower (2012: 4) argues that social justice education

necessitates the ability for educators to engage on three levels. The first is for teachers to have a recognition and political analysis of injustice and how it operates to create and maintain oppression on multiple levels. The second is teachers' willingness and ability to integrate this analysis into academic teaching in the classrooms. The third is that teachers must have the mindsets and the skills to expand their social justice work outside the classroom as activists, with students and on their own, to combat multiple forms of oppression.

Social justice education and critical pedagogy are therefore intimately related. So are other forms of critical education alternatives. For example, while some efforts at multicultural education are superficial, there is a large literature on more critical approaches to

multicultural education that explicitly draw upon critical pedagogy (May and Sleeter, 2010). While there has been a long liberal literature on democracy and education (Gutmann, 1987), some work on democratic schools fits very well with a critical pedagogy (Apple and Beane, 2007). There are also efforts that combine ecological education and critical pedagogy (Kahn, 2010). Similarly, while there are liberal visions of citizenship education, there are also ones that have a much more critical pedagogy slant (Hyslop-Margison and Thayer, 2009). There are also other literatures and practices that tie closely to the approach of critical pedagogy such as “anti-oppressive, anti-racist education as well as queer, woman, and disability studies [and] critical race theory” (Picower, 2012: 4).

Freire has been extremely influential. Educational alternatives abound. It is likely that hundreds of thousands or perhaps even millions of teachers around the globe engage in forms of critical pedagogy. Sometimes, whole school systems do. Freire himself was Secretary of Education for the city of Sao Paulo (O’Cadiz et al., 1998). Brazil has other significant examples. The Citizen School movement has built a sizable democratic, participatory, Freirean-based education system (Fischman and Gandin, 2007). In Brazil also, there are the Landless Movement schools, founded by some of the poorest people in all the world, often living off agricultural labor, now organized and politically influential, with a large system of very participatory, democratic, Freirean-based schools (McCowan, 2003; Tarlau, 2015). These schools teach—and exemplify by their very structure—the role of education in preparing people for a much more participatory and democratic economy and society (Edwards and Klees, 2012).

Even critical pedagogy confined to the classroom can be a non-reformist reform:

Revolutionary classrooms are prefigurative of socialism in the sense that they are connected to social relations that we want to create as revolutionary socialists. The organization of classrooms generally tries to mirror what students and teachers would collectively like to see in the world outside of schools – respect for everyone’s ideas, tolerance of differences, a commitment to creativity and social and educational justice, the importance of working collectively, a willingness and desire to work hard for the betterment of humanity, and a commitment to antiracist, antisexist, and antihomophobic practices. (McLaren, 2007: 310)

## **The struggle will be difficult**

I don’t want to romanticize any of this. A study by Baxter (2016) of education and development strategies in Ecuador suggests how difficult progressive change can be. Raoul Correa was elected President of Ecuador in 2006 on a very explicit left, democratic socialist, progressive platform. He entered the Presidency with very strong backing (57% of the vote) and offered a widely supported platform that explicitly criticized the neoliberal, capitalist, and ineffective, almost anarchic government of his predecessors. In his first few years, he presided over writing a new Constitution with widespread societal participation, yielding one of the most progressive Constitutions in the world.

In education, Correa restructured a completely dysfunctional Ministry, enacted a major curriculum reform, set up mechanisms for teacher career advancement and teacher evaluation, tripled teacher salaries, and increased resources for education from 2.5% of

GDP to over 5%. Significant gains were made in student learning. Yet, despite initial support, Correa is now facing widespread criticism from the left for:

a state-centric and technocratic approach to reform . . . , [an] over-centralized model of school management . . . , a reductionist approach to quality . . . , [and] diminishing spaces for debate, deliberation and participation around the reform. (Baxter, 2016: 27)

Correa is even often accused of following a neoliberal approach. While this is a very complex story, Baxter's very interesting analysis suggests that while Correa was sensible in starting with a state-centric approach given the dysfunctional neoliberal government he inherited, he needed to, after a time, switch gears to the sort of participatory governance guaranteed by the new Ecuadoran Constitution.

There is a history of left governments turning autocratic—Russia, China, Cuba are clear examples, but also countries like Nicaragua and Venezuela. Some part of this can be blamed on the hostility and aggression these countries faced from most of the international community, but part may be due to the corrupting influence of attaining power. There have, of course, been many left governments that have not succumbed to this, although generally these are Western countries where democracy has longer roots. But there are also exemplars, despite problems, from Latin America—Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and others.

## Conclusions

So progressive change will be difficult. But what choice is there? Capitalism has been so terrible for so long for so many—as are other oppressive structures of our world system. Capitalism may be more difficult to change than other structures in some ways. We have clearer ideas of what a non-racist, non-sexist, non-heterosexual world would look like than we do a non-capitalist world. Nonetheless, patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism have been around much longer than capitalism and are deeply entrenched. For progressive change, it is essential for us to work together across interests, sectors, and issues.

Some critics have hope that attention to human rights and the SDGs can transform our world system to one that is just and fair. While every place can be a site for progressive struggles, real change will need much more. There is strong resistance to implementing a human rights agenda, especially if it includes social and economic rights. Agreements like EFA, the Millennium Development Goals, and the SDGs have made hardly a dent in global marginalization and suffering. They serve to strengthen neoliberal and capitalist ideology by promising change that barely comes. Each decade we simply postpone achieving these goals to further in the future—when all goals could be achievable in a very short time if concerted efforts were made. Even pittance like the globally agreed upon 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) being devoted to Official Development Assistance (ODA) are nowhere near forthcoming. The US currently spends about 0.13% of GNI on ODA. It is very interesting to note that in the early 1950s, the US spent relatively much, much more—over 20 times as much—closer to 3%! However, this was to help our Western allies and former enemies (through the Marshall Plan), not to help the developing world. This racist, classist disregard for marginalized people is simply horrible. Our world system is working fine for those who have the most say in its governance. Neither schools nor the economy are failing the well-off. I believe that most of those well-off have good intentions, but they are trapped by their ideologies in structures of their own making that do not allow serious attention to

those who are not well-off. Perhaps 60% of the planet's population is living on less than \$5 a day, which is closer to what a real poverty line should look like. This is a travesty, criminal in a world that could offer plenty to everyone.

We can do much better. I am an optimist—for many reasons. So much of the work I discussed above on alternatives gives one hope. The efforts of so many social movements across the globe give one hope as well. I see successes in electoral politics that have brought a progressive left to power in half-a-dozen or more Latin American countries and gave Bernie Sanders such a good run in the US.<sup>10</sup> I am also optimistic because I was fortunate enough to twice attend the WSF in Brazil and march with 100,000 activists from all over the world and meet some of them who were struggling to change the world in areas like education, health, food, water, environment, or development generally. As I said earlier, they go home from the Forum and interact with millions, building a global network. I am also optimistic because I have been fortunate to work in dozens of countries, and *everywhere* I found people who believed what is the slogan of the WSF—Another World is Possible—and who were struggling for it. Another world *is* possible.

Finally, I want to close by mentioning some of what critical scholars/analysts might usefully do based on Michael Apple's (2013: 41–44) tasks set out in his book, *Can Education Change Society?*

- Document exploitation, marginalization, reproduction;
- Document progressive struggles;
- Help identify spaces and possibilities for counter-hegemonic action;
- Speak to non-academic audiences;
- Work in concert with critical activists and social movements in education and cross-sectors; and
- Confront the intersection of oppressive structures, as above.

Despite current hegemony, I believe we may be able to avoid making the planet uninhabitable and that we can create a fairer world.

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### **Notes**

1. The terms “developed” and “developing” are very problematic (Esteva et al., 2013). I still use them for a lack of good alternatives.
2. These three challenges, of course, do not exhaust the significant problems faced around the globe which include the environmental destruction, widespread conflict, and appeal to greed as a motivating force, all of which have significant connections to all forms of capitalism that so dominate our world system, as I consider below.



3. The following argument is taken from Klees (2016b).
4. Perhaps the real meaning of human capital under capitalism is as Martelli suggests: “Capitalism requires increasing number of workers, citizens, and consumers who willingly do what they are told to do and what they are told to think. The production of such human capital is the most fundamental role schools play in a capitalist society” (Martelli, 2005 quoted in Hill and Kumar, 2009: ix.).
5. This argument is taken from Klees (2012) and further elaborated there.
6. This argument is taken from Klees (2016b).
7. Ellerman (2015) argues that the capitalist system of wage labor, embodied in the employer–employee contract, is, like slavery, based on coercion and calls for a neo-abolitionist movement.
8. While markets are a convenience that future, saner, societies may continue to rely on for some purposes, they have at least two fundamental flaws that render them problematic. First, they contribute to an abrogation of social responsibility, as today, when market outcomes of horrendous income inequality, hunger, or environmental destruction are seen as natural, not anyone’s fault. Second, markets are fragile. For example, millions of small decisions can contribute to economic or environmental crises. Albritton adds: “Markets are often thought to be highly efficient, but in the future they will be seen as highly inefficient and costly. Markets not only fail to take account of social and environmental costs, but they also generate instability, insecurity, inequality, antisocial egotism, frenetic lifestyles, cultural impoverishment, beggar-thy-neighbor greed and oppression of difference” (quoted in Wall, 2015: 1). See Hahnel (2005) for a discussion of alternatives to competitive markets.
9. Alperovitz is one of the organizers of the Next System Project, focused on finding alternatives to current structures (<http://thenextsystem.org/>).
10. While dismaying, I am still optimistic despite the election of Donald Trump and other global advances by the far right and populist fringe. I am not a Polyanna, but I do believe that their successes bring systemic contradictions into even sharper relief and I hope that will generate even greater resistance and search for alternatives.

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