

Jochai Ben-Avie

Kibbutz Chanaton, Israel/New Haven, CT
Political Studies, Psychology, & Economics
Thesis Advisor: Anne O'Dwyer

The Alienation of Learning: An Examination of the Influence of Capitalism on Public Education in America.

In my thesis, I am exploring the influence of capitalism on public secondary education in the United States. The idea of a tax-supported universal education system was a radical idea that challenged the entrenched belief that education should be reserved for the wealthy and political elite. The fact that this education system is tax-supported is integral, in that it signals a belief in education as a public good (i.e., a good that individuals cannot purchase efficiently in the private market, and that society benefits from having provided by the government). However, specifically during the last century, the American notion of public education has changed dramatically. We have seen an increase in the influence of capitalism on the education system, especially on the secondary level, with increasing standardized testing, uniform curricula, academic tracking, and a belief that education should be seen simply as a means to increase one's future earnings potential, a private good. At the heart of this transformation in American education, are differing beliefs regarding the purpose of education and how best to better society.

I will posit that as the influence of capitalism on public secondary education in America has increased, so too has the amount that students are alienated from their learning. Furthermore, this commodification of education has had detrimental consequences for individuals and American society as a whole. In nearly every demographic category, the American high school is more segregated, students have lower knowledge retention rates, and are less productive in their work today. Writers from Marx and Althusser to Erikson to Kahneman have suggested that the relations of labor (and society) are produced and reproduced in the classroom, so the adverse effects of today's education system are not limited to the school alone. I will then apply this analysis to a contemporary case-study, the No Child Left Behind Act. Along the way, I will critique the fallacy of American meritocracy and the belief in this country that everyone should receive a university-level education. Drawing on my background in political science, public policy, economics, and social psychology, I will explore how the government can better address this old problem of how to "fix" the education system from a new, interdisciplinary lens.

I will suggest that in order to achieve meaningful reform, we must achieve a paradigmatic shift in American education, and return to seeing education as a public good. While I do not want to romanticize a mythical "Golden Age" of American education that never existed, the fact that the American people voted to have their government provide such an education system clearly reflects a belief in the value of an educated populace and the notion of education as a public good. This focus on the private vs. public debate and the increasing influence of capitalism, informs a different set of policy prescriptions and proscriptions, which I will explore how to implement in an economically and politically feasible manner.