Having to respond to reviews of my own work reminds me of the old joke about the nuns who take a vow of silence, except that each year at Christmas dinner one nun gets to say one thing. One year, the nun whose turn it is to speak stands up and says, “The soup always tastes too watery.” A whole year passes, then another nun stands up and says, “I rather like the soup.” The following year, a third nun stands up and says: “Bicker, bicker, bicker.”

Writers often feel pressure to say something new, to differentiate themselves from existing arguments or approaches. And why not? Writing is the creation of new knowledge, not the recasting of old. Under the pressure to say something new, however, writers — especially scholarly writers — can occasionally lapse into bickering: picking fights where none exist, making mountains out of mole hills, or otherwise succumbing to the narcissism of minor differences. I know. I do it all the time.

In what follows, I will do my best to avoid bickering for the sake of bickering, and to avoid interpreting differences of opinion over the quality of the soup as serious schisms, especially since I appreciate the serious reading each essayist has given my book. At the same time, I do not always recognize my book in what reviewers have to say about it, and occasionally it seems like they take issue with what they think I must have said rather than what I did say. Once the corrections are in, though, I predict that we nuns agree about the soup more than we might suppose.

Let me start with the question of race, since Clayton Pierce asks about it specifically and other reviewers bring it up in passing. I cannot do much more than confirm what Pierce observes. Racism played an essential role in the formation of U.S. capitalism; we continue to live in a society riven by race; and race assists in preserving the status quo.

Here is one illustration of American racism and its effects. In a now-classic study, sociologists discovered that when white and black high school graduates apply for a low-wage job, a white applicant is more than twice as likely to get called back for an interview than a black applicant. It gets worse. The researchers also found that when whites indicated on their application that they had just finished an eighteen-month stint in prison for possession of cocaine with intent to distribute, even they got called back for an interview more often than black applicants without a criminal record. In other words, employers prefer white drug dealers to law-abiding blacks, so you can imagine how blacks with criminal
records fare. They may as well not even apply.¹ Cruelly, too, our police and judicial system, as a number of recent books demonstrate, treat black men as guilty until proven innocent, and thus black men acquire these disqualifying criminal records at rates far out of proportion to the number of crimes they commit.²

American racism explains why capitalism developed the way it did in the United States, but it also explains why the welfare state — or what passes for the welfare state — developed the way it did. As Alberto Alesina, Edward Glaeser, and Bruce Sacerdote demonstrated over a decade ago, one reason — perhaps the major reason — why the United States does not have a European-style welfare state is race. In the United States, many white voters (mistakenly) think of poverty as an exclusively black problem, and they do not want their resources going to “those people.”³ As a result, the poor of all races suffer, but that is the price white America is willing to pay for its racism.

As for why racial capitalism should persist even after voters put aside their racism to elect a black president, a partial answer may lie in recent data on labor force participation rates — what percentage of adults had full- or part-time jobs — by sex, race, and ethnicity over the last forty years.⁴ Particularly notable is the trajectory for black men: there is a drop from 73.6 percent of black men participating in the labor force in 1972 to 63.6 percent in 2012, a decline of 10 percentage points. The labor force participation rate of white men also fell by 8.6 percentage points, but it started at 79.6 percent. Effectively, white men are now where black men were nearly two generations ago.

I do not believe this decline in the labor force participation rate is a supply-side story; in other words, the evidence does not suggest that white and black men made themselves unemployable because they preferred a life of crime or dependence. In 1972, the high school dropout rate for black men between the ages of 16


and 24 was 22.3 percent. In 2011 it was 8.3 percent.\textsuperscript{5} (For white men, it dropped from 11.6 percent to 5.4 percent.) If anything, by graduating from high school at higher rates, black youths made themselves more employable, not less. But that does not mean they could find employment. The structure of the economy evidently changed, and in such a way that it no longer needed as many workers — especially black male workers — as it once did. Think of it this way: our post-racial society could find one job (president) for one black man, but black men everywhere else had to watch jobs disappear.

The upshot is that racism and discrimination persist because there are not enough jobs and livelihoods to go around, and men — especially black men — have paid the price. Tragically, we may not have invested in jobs, but we did invest in a prison system ready to incarcerate and manage the surplus labor.

What does American racism mean for education? Clayton Pierce asks how “Marxist analyses of schooling” would change if viewed “through the lens of racial capitalism.” For what I argued in \textit{Class Dismissed}, I suppose the story I tell about “the preservation of capitalist society” would no longer turn on narcissistic reformers, or on workers blaming themselves for failing to take advantage of their educational opportunities and thus quietly accepting their diminished fate. Rather, it would make room for the “wages of whiteness,” and how they have divided workers and created a de facto racial caste system.\textsuperscript{6} True enough.

But here I would insist that the story I told in \textit{Class Dismissed} was not primarily about the preservation of capitalist society. Instead, it was about how to correct — or begin to correct — the injustices of capitalist society. In that case, race matters, but it also does not. It matters to the extent that African Americans bear more than their fair share of the injustices of capitalist society: fewer jobs, greater poverty, weaker civil rights. It matters too in that race continues to divide people who would benefit the most from getting together to make capitalism more just. But race does not matter inasmuch as the problem for white and black workers alike is not education but jobs — how many there are and what they pay. Doubtless, schools could do a better job of distributing educational opportunity to black youth. (Jonathan Kozol is right.)\textsuperscript{7} But as I show again and again in \textit{Class Dismissed}, schools cannot create new jobs, stop the old ones from disappearing, or make them pay more than they do. And that goes for people regardless of the color of their skin, and regardless of how or by what mechanism capitalism is reproduced.

But when you put it as I just have, the question inevitably arises of which story should matter more: how capitalism in the United States is preserved, or how to


\textsuperscript{7} See Jonathan Kozol, \textit{Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools} [New York: Random House, 1991].
fix its injustices. If you are a certain kind of Marxist, the former story will appeal because you are not looking to fix capitalism but to replace it. Indeed, you do not think it can be fixed. However, if you are not that kind of Marxist, or not a Marxist at all; or if you think capitalism has changed for the better in the past and could do so again; or if you are not convinced that what the Marxists have in mind to replace capitalism will work, then the latter story about how to fix capitalism, assuming we could muster the will, will matter more. In short, should you try to fix the car or just junk it?

Kevin Murray and Daniel P. Liston chide me because in telling a story about how to change capitalism for the better, I imply that it can be changed and that our economic fate is not structurally determined. I do believe that, but I think they exaggerate my position. They write:

Marsh appears to reject what we have called structural fate: that is, he does not take our possible economic and educational futures to be significantly determined and constrained by the internal mechanics of capitalism. He holds out hope that economic justice might emerge from the new space available to us after we have recognized the impotence of educational activity. Given that Marsh has relatively little to say about capitalism itself, presumably this goal of economic justice might be achieved inside of the existing capitalist mode of production. That seems both unduly hopeful and a significant limitation for Marsh’s economic project.

Below this, they write, “The bleaker, and we believe more accurate, interpretation is that capitalism is very unlikely to produce greater economic equality. The structural dynamics of the past, the present, and our probable future point to greater, not lesser, economic inequality.” And finally, “Given these unduly hopeful and unrealistic economic forecasts, we suspect that Marsh is not sufficiently bleak.”

These passages surprise me for two reasons. First, this is the very first time I have ever been called “not sufficiently bleak.” My friends will be thrilled to learn there are people out there bleaker than me. Second, it surprises me because here is what I did say in the book about the prospects for economic change:

The question, then, is not how to — or what policies might — reverse decades of falling bargaining power and increasing economic inequality.... Rather, the question is why American democracy has not undertaken these reforms. The short answer is that it has not because it cannot. And it will not, without some change that remains difficult if not impossible to imagine.

I did not offer a longer answer. Below that, I write, “At various moments in American history the possibilities of reform must have looked as dismal as they do today, but today they look especially dismal, even exceptionally bleak” (CD, 201). And then, for emphasis, I conclude, “If I were a betting man, I would wager that the radical economic inequality of the last thirty to forty years is here to stay. If it

8. Kevin Murray and Daniel P. Liston, “Schooling in Capitalism: Navigating the Bleak Pathways of Structural Fate,” in this issue. Subsequent quotations of Murray and Liston in the text and notes refer to this article.

9. John Marsh, Class Dismissed: Why We Cannot Teach or Learn Our Way out of Inequality [New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011], 200. This work will be cited in the text as CD for all subsequent references.
does change, it is likely to grow worse rather than better" \(\text{[CD, 201]}\). I don’t know how much bleaker I could be.\(^{10}\)

True, I did not — deliberately — use the language of Marxism, for a reason that Murray and Liston guess, which is that that language is usually a dead letter for most people. And it is also true that I do not denounce capitalism, wave the Socialist banner, and start singing “The Internationale,” and all this may make me “unduly hopeful” and a purveyor of “unrealistic economic forecasts.” But it also makes me, I think, very realistic indeed and appropriately hopeful or, as the case may be, hopeless. I admit that I remain — against all the evidence — existentially committed to the possibility of change for the better within capitalism. The alternative — that we have to wait for capitalism to burn out or fade away or for a revolution to replace it — strikes me as altogether too Leninist. Moreover, capitalism has changed in the past, even when the prospects for change — for example, the waning days of the Hoover administration — looked at least as grim as they do today. In the winter of 1932, who could see the Wagner Act coming?\(^{11}\) Yet I also remain open to the possibility that capitalism will have to burn itself out — literally in the case of global warming — before things can change, assuming, at that point, that it is not too late. But when it comes to capitalism, we cannot know for certain what lies ahead, and I distrust anyone who says they do.\(^{12}\)

This last discussion about the possibility for change within capitalism raises the question that Murray and Liston as well as Michael Apple ask, namely, what I make of critical pedagogy. Actually, Apple does not ask the question so much as lecture me and the other authors under review for supposedly betraying the cause of critical pedagogy.\(^{13}\) That may apply to the other authors, but nothing in my book suggests it. I did not write a book called \textit{Why Education Cannot Change Society}. I did write a book subtitled \textit{Why We Cannot Teach or Learn Our Way out of Inequality}, and here is what I do argue, on the very last page of the book: “if

\(^{10}\) The passage surprises me for a third reason, too, which is that despite our apparent differences over the possibilities for change within capitalism, my approach to teaching matches almost perfectly the radical humanism Murray and Liston describe and celebrate in the closing pages of their essay. As an English professor, I teach some of the very texts Mark Edmundson commends in \textit{Why Read?} \(\text{[New York: Bloomsbury, 2004]}\), and I do so because, as Murray and Liston eloquently put it, “It is an education that challenges, encourages, and assists us to think about what we value and how we ought to live.” At some level, Murray and Liston must believe as I do that our fate is not entirely structurally determined, else why would they bother to teach against the capitalist grain? Real Marxists know that the superstructure of education is at least as structurally determined as the economy.

\(^{11}\) The Wagner Act of 1935, officially titled the National Labor Relations Act, was enacted to protect the right of most workers to organize autonomous trade unions, to engage in collective bargaining, and to take collective action (including strikes).

\(^{12}\) Nor do I know, as Murray and Liston put it, whether “[it is] reasonable to believe that we can create and, in time, universalize the conditions necessary for human flourishing inside capitalism.” It seems to me unreasonable to demand such a thing of any economic system here on earth, but depending on how you define “human flourishing,” I would offer that some Scandinavian countries have come close.

\(^{13}\) Michael W. Apple, “Reframing the Question of Whether Education Can Change Society,” in this issue. Subsequent quotations of Apple in the text refer to this article.
what matters to you is economics, poverty, and income inequality, you ought to focus on economics and not a poor proxy for economics like education” (CD, 212). I thought that if would have spoken for itself, but perhaps it does not. I suppose I could have gone on longer about the good that schools do or the good that social movements organized around the schools can do, but this seemed obvious. (Where would the civil rights movement have been if not for fights about schools?) In any case, I stand by that if. If what matters to you is poverty or economic inequality, forget schools. However, if what matters to you is sexual violence, gender equity, integration, civil rights, the environment, or peace, then the schools might be a very good place to start. They have been in the past, and they may be in the future. But poverty and economic inequality involve fundamentals of our social structure that schools either do not touch, or only make worse.

As for critical pedagogy itself, consider that if again. It leaves open the possibility, I suppose, that one might use education to address economics, not to say that education will in and of itself diminish inequality or poverty but that it might bring the issue to consciousness and incubate social movements that would diminish inequality and poverty. The sentence does not say that explicitly, though, probably because I do not believe it, especially when it comes to higher education.

When I wrote Class Dismissed, I planned to include a chapter that addressed this very question, but I made the mistake — I think it was a mistake — of sending it as an article to a journal editor who, after he accepted it, would not let it appear both in the journal and then later in the book. Since the journal was a prominent one in my field, and I was going up for tenure soon, I let the journal publish it.14 In my defense, I wasn’t fully convinced it belonged in the book, either, but it turns out I was wrong about that. In any case, in that piece, I discussed a course I taught in the literature of poverty in the United States (from John Winthrop to Barbara Ehrenreich), and I argued that I did not believe teachers could open their students’ eyes to injustice as readily as some proponents of critical pedagogy believed, and I wondered, especially in the case of poverty, what students would do with their newly opened eyes once they also saw how few opportunities for radical change truly presented themselves in the world today.

My thoughts have not changed much since. Although I am not ready to give up on them, with Murray and Liston (and David Blacker), I share a disappointment in “the minimal success of social justice pedagogies,” especially, again, when it comes to what matters most to me: the issues of poverty and economic inequality. In Class Dismissed, I argue that education is what allows Americans with a concern for justice to sleep at night: “Because Americans have built schools and funded loans and scholarships, anyone who wants to get ahead can. If people cannot or do not get ahead, however, that is on them” (CD, 169). When I am feeling especially bleak — that word again — and caustic, I joke that critical pedagogy is what allows radical professors to sleep at night. By its light, they are not decently

paid cogs in the great training and sorting machine that is higher education, but burrowers from within, saboteurs, on a long march through the institutions ... pick your slogan.

But I know better. Few teachers really believe such clichés, and most are infinitely more sophisticated about the political possibilities of higher education. Moreover, I do not deny — as Apple seems to think — “the crucial role schools can play in the formation of counterhegemonic social movements.” Yet I do think we make a mistake when we imagine students as the radical agent of change (or even a radical agent of change) or schools as the place to cultivate that change. My model for a social movement is the labor organizing drives of the 1930s, which had next to nothing to do with schools — except, decades later, to organize the teachers, secretaries, and janitors who worked in them.

As I have suggested, those organizing successes largely came out of nowhere, and they could come out of nowhere again. Our economic fate is structurally determined until the day it is not. Should that day come, I hope our schools come along for the ride. But we should not wait for them — or think that we cannot proceed without them. Or so says this nun.