This issue of *Educational Theory* engages some of the pressing questions in the current political economy of education: capitalist crisis and potential for revolutionary transformation, the relationship of capitalism and racism, and the role of schools in social change. I want to briefly engage these questions, as a scholar and social activist.

The symposium in this issue circles around the power and limitations of Marxist and neo-Marxist theory to illuminate educational systems and problems. But what do we mean by “Marxism”? Marx was limited by his own context and time and European perspective. But subsequently, revolutionaries in Europe, Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba, Southern Africa, and now Latin America revised and extended Marx’s thought in relation to their own conditions. It is outside Europe that the major theoretical innovations and experiments with socialism have taken place. Important work in areas of culture, subjectivity, race, gender, and space have further reworked and expanded, as well as contested, some of Marx’s insights. Michael Apple takes up this point in his warning against economic reductionist tendencies in Marxist scholarship in favor of multidimensional analyses that account for the interrelation of the economic, political, and cultural and inter-imbrications of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy.1

Multidimensional Marxist perspectives inform a rich scholarly conversation about the interrelation and relative independence of multiple ordering structures and subject positions, for example, capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, class, race, and gender.2 And recent scholarship on education and the urban context draws on Marxist-informed critical and cultural geography.3


Bringing in these spatial lenses illuminates education’s role in the destruction and reconstruction of the built environment for capital accumulation and in classed and raced meanings of space and place. In addition, it is important to remember that Marxian analysis is rooted in dialectics of structure and agency and seeks to reveal contradictions and contestations in order to illuminate pathways to human liberation. It is an action-oriented and dialectical perspective.

We need such multifaceted and dialectical analyses to grasp the complexity of the present social conjuncture and possibilities for counterhegemonic action. Further, we need scholarship that is rooted in lived experience to reveal social struggles and potentialities not visible from a bird’s-eye view. Clearly, no one discipline, no one body of scholarship, no one book can accomplish all this, but it is a standard against which we should measure the strengths and limitations of our work.

**Dangers and Opportunities of the Present Social Conjuncture**

Capitalism is clearly in the foreground in a way that it has not been for many decades. Signs of economic stagnation, environmental devastation, and human disposability are everywhere. As a teacher, parent, university worker, city dweller, and education organizer, I too see seemingly “intractable obstacles” to a “more just and democratic economic world.” But I don’t share the “bleak” outlook or the fatalism of some authors of the books and commentaries featured in this symposium. I do share a deep awareness of the immense suffering produced by a vicious neoliberal brand of capitalism in decline and the dangers of the present situation in which capitalism, out of room for growth, has descended into parasitism, militarism, and societal fascism. Unchecked, it put us on a road to ecological and social catastrophe. As economic, social, and environmental crises pile up, I share David Blacker’s alarm at the potential for a descent into barbarism as the only way for capital to maintain world

---


4. 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 refer to this article.


---

PAULINE LIPMAN is Professor of Educational Policy Studies and Director of the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, 1040 W. Harrison St., Chicago, IL 60607; e-mail <plipman@uic.edu>. Her primary areas of scholarship are political economy, urban educational policy, race, globalization, and education.
dominance — or survive. But a dialectical perspective reveals other dynamics as well.

Crises are moments pregnant with danger and opportunity: they reveal fundamental contradictions in society and open space for radical change — potentially both destructive and liberatory. The opportunity presented by crisis was not only clear to Marx and to revolutionary movements that followed, but to neoliberal icon Milton Friedman who asserted, “Only a crisis — actual or perceived — produces real change.” Presently the neoliberal state in the United States and Western Europe uses economic and fiscal crises as a warrant to further privatize public institutions, degrade labor, and strip away the remaining vestiges of the welfare state. The current capitalist crisis, the deepest since the 1930s, is actually one of a string of crises of overaccumulation that has occurred during the past four decades, all attributable to long-term capitalist stagnation. But capitalism will not collapse on its own as Blacker seems to suggest — the flexibility of post-2008 neoliberal strategies illustrates this point.

Blacker’s dystopian vision of “terminal” capitalism appears to assume no social agency other than that of the titans of capital and the neoliberal state apparatus, including the “narrow economic instrumentalism” of schooling for a disposable workforce. This dystopian future evokes the haunting images of Alfonso Cuarón’s 2007 film, Children of Men, in which the world has plunged into barbarism and sterility; or perhaps the famous image of Charlie Chaplin caught in the gears of the machine in Modern Times. These are images largely bereft of social actors, save Cuarón’s metaphorical Noah’s ark figure from the global North trying to save the human species from extinction. This dystopian future stems from Blacker’s thesis that whole sectors of people are no longer necessary for capturing surplus value and have become disposable, not worth educating. He sees little hope and little role for struggles in education since schooling will be largely abandoned as a site of social reproduction. I agree that there is plenty of evidence for the racialized disposability of specific groups of people, for example, displaced migrants from Africa, African American men in the U.S. prison complex, dwellers of the favelas and shanty towns of the global South, women forced into the global sex trade, and more. I have made this argument with regard to school

closings in African American urban communities as part of a strategy of organized state abandonment.¹²

However, as a projection of the future, this fatalistic account suffers from Eurocentrism and misses actual social forces in contradiction with capitalism and domination. In general, narratives of neoliberalism that privilege financialization and information technology in the workings of late capitalism miss the heterogeneity of the global capitalist system and, specifically, Southern social actors. (Some of my work is guilty of this too.) Raewyn Connell and NourDados argue that the dynamics of capital propelling neoliberalism in the North are not necessarily those of the South, where neoliberal strategies focus on industrialization for export based on cheap labor, extraction industries, agricultural restructuring, and opening economies to international capital.¹³ Prioritizing the experiences of the global South allows us to see other key features of neoliberalism, including the globalization of production, with the relocation of industry to the “production hearths” of the global South.¹⁴ Summing this up, Connell and Dados argue, “Neoliberalism on a world scale seems to have produced a more diversified and chaotic economic process, but one that is far from the ‘weightless economy’ invoked by commentators on financialization, since it rests on a massive weight of material trade.”¹⁵ Accumulation strategies in the South are accompanied by a variety of state forms, contradictions of the state and global capital, migrations, new labor positions, and social movements that differ from those in Western Europe and the United States.¹⁶

In the global South, antineoliberal state actors, social experiments in cooperative economics, and reinventions of socialism shaped by endogenous conditions and regional contexts and indigenous actors are a potentially powerful force against global financial interests.¹⁷ It is not surprising, then, that emergent movements toward socialism with an endogenous face have developed in Latin America, the weak link in neoliberal globalization.¹⁸ The influence of some of these movements on North American education is reflected in the Tri-National Coalition to

---


¹⁷. For discussion of these reinventions, see, for example, Michael A. Lebowitz, Build It Now: Socialism for the Twenty-First Century (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006).

Defend Public Education and the emergence of social movement teacher unionism in the United States. The social contradictions produced by neoliberal development strategies and popular movements in the South are also generating important critical social theory that is generally absent from the U.S. and European lexicon.19

**The Interrelationship of Racism and Capitalism**

In *The New Political Economy of Urban Education*, I show that race and capital are intertwined in the concrete production of educational injustice and, more broadly, in the neoliberal economic, spatial, and social restructuring of the city for capital accumulation and racial exclusion and containment. I demonstrate that logics of race (white supremacy) and capital intersect to privatize public schools, with the state casting off responsibility for educating students of color while education management organizations and investors profit from privatizing their schools. In *High Stakes Education*, I also argue that these intertwined logics animate educational policies that produce new forms of race and class inequality that reproduce an intensely stratified labor force.20 Analyses of neoliberalism that privilege the economy21 miss the crucial role that cultural politics of race, gender, and sexuality play in neoliberalization.22 Racially coded and gendered morality discourses underpin social-state dismantling and markets in education and other public institutions as the private is equated with “good” and “white” and the public with “bad” and “black.”23 Discourses of racial pathology justify closing schools and dismantling public housing to clear the way for real estate investment and gentrification, facilitating the expulsion of low-income working-class African Americans and Latinos from valuable land and the creation of selective public schools for the middle and upper-middle class. This process is enabled by decades of racial segregation and disinvestment in African American schools and communities.

Thus, in the United States, we cannot talk about class reproduction through education or about privatization as a capital accumulation strategy without also examining them as racial strategies, as national education activists of color are doing.24 We do need to bring the economy back into educational scholarship, but Clayton Pierce is right that “classical Marxist interpretations of education

---

21. For example, Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.
22. Duggan, *The Twilight of Inequality*.
... fail to adequately address the fundamental role race plays in the processes of capital accumulation.”25 Zeus Leonardo also calls for “stretching the conceptual tendons of orthodox Marxism to explain the subjective experience of racial subordination.”26 As David Roberts and Minelle Mahtani point out, “it is important to examine not just the momentary eruptions of race or racism that seemingly result from neoliberal policy reforms, and instead consider race as an organizing principle of society that neoliberalism reinforces and modifies.”27 So we need educational scholarship that illuminates intersecting dynamics of race and class, racism and capitalism, as relatively independent but coconstitutive ordering systems in society. (I would add patriarchy as well.) I take this to be one of Michael Apple’s principal arguments in his discussion of the books in this symposium.

Pierce critiques Marxist analyses of schooling as “inherently limited in that they tend to assume class solidarity among working-class populations while neglecting how race (and specifically the maintenance of white supremacy) plays a constitutive role in the processes of wealth accumulation.” Pierce historicizes the biologization of race and the integral role of racial subordination, colonization, and enslavement in the formation and expansion of capitalism. While white supremacy was central to capital accumulation, evolving capitalist modes of accumulation, including neoliberalism, have further exploited and marginalized racially subordinated groups. Here, it is important to acknowledge recent education scholarship that is influenced by Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions as well as by critical theories of race and racism. Recent theoretical interventions offer more multifaceted and synthetic analyses of the coconstitutive dynamics of race and capitalism in education.28 And various studies examine how dynamics of race and capital work in specific contexts to reproduce race and class relations of power, and also how these relations of power are contested.29

Can Schools Change Society?

Along with others in this symposium, I welcome the return to a focus on the economy in education scholarship. I agree with John Marsh that education has displaced “the debate about social class and economic power that Americans


28. See, for example, Brown and De Lissovoy, “Economies of Racism”; and Leonardo, “The Race for Class.”

need to have if we are to understand the causes of and cures for sustained poverty and increasing inequality.” There is a carefully cultivated history of this organized discursive diversion, beginning with *A Nation at Risk*, up to Bill Gates’s championing of the Common Core Curriculum Standards to increase U.S. economic competitiveness with the putative outcome of general prosperity. But there is also a tendency in critical scholarship to see critical pedagogy and other educational innovations as the mechanism to change society. Both John Marsh and Mike Cole debunk the notion that schooling will create economic justice. They argue in the same vein as Jean Anyon, who reminded us that fixing schools will not fix society and that what should count as educational policy includes ending poverty, quality affordable housing and health care, good paying jobs, equitable tax and transportation policies, and so on.

While it is naïve to assume that schools can transform society or produce economic justice or end racism, we should recall Stuart Hall’s comment that “education might be thought of as the pursuit of politics ‘by other means.’” *The New Political Economy of Urban Education* demonstrates that education is a key site of contestation over, in Nancy Fraser’s terms, economic redistribution, cultural recognition, and political participation. Schools are, as Apple argues, “[a crucial arena] for social mobilization and for the formation of counterhegemonic identities and movements. They are central institutions in the struggle against neoliberal ideologies and agendas.” Again, we need a dialectical approach, particularly at a moment when education is a principal target of attacks on public sector unions and is at the center of austerity politics, privatization of the public sphere, and the penetration of neoliberal ideology and managerialism into public institutions. To see schools as peripheral to struggles over the economy is to miss what is happening on the ground where education is a focal point of opposition to markets and attacks on unions. Moreover, public education is a terrain in which right-wing and white supremacist culture wars play out, such as the attack on the ethnic studies program in Tucson, Arizona, and the resurgence of creationism and climate change denial in school curricula. School discipline policies are also key links in the


racialized carceral state strategy of late capitalism. In Chicago, the alliance of a social movement teachers union, parents, students, and organized communities of color has been the most visible force arrayed against the city’s neoliberal policies. Moreover, this alliance is beginning to link schools to the campaign for a living wage and for restitution of taxpayer funds paid to banks for predatory interest rate swap deals.

To suggest that education is peripheral to economic struggles also ignores several decades of scholarship on the ideological role of the school curriculum in the construction of capitalist and imperialist hegemony. Moreover, it misses the important ideological work of educators, working within the constraints of neoliberal policy, to unmask structures of domination and exploitation and help students envision a different social order. I underscore Paul Warmington’s assertion that educators are positioned to “work with students to reject the notion of education as private property ... [and] to argue for principles of public good and mutual social obligations.” Kevin Murray and Daniel Liston remind us of the importance of this radical education tradition: “Without such vital consciousness, we have little hope of generating the shared political vision necessary for these policy changes.”

The Role of Activist Scholarship

The devastating effects of neoliberalism and the prolonged economic crisis have spawned both progressive and reactionary/xenophobic currents. The situation is fluid. Although education cannot change society, educational campaigns can contribute to wider political-economic struggles. We have a role to play as educators and activist scholars. Our specialized knowledge and skills can contribute to education movements, if we approach collaborations with epistemological humility, recognizing that the academy offers just one source of knowledge and that our role is limited.

Perhaps the despair of intellectuals is rooted in distance from the lived realities of social contradictions and people’s persistence, against all odds, in attempting to transform them. For women and men subjected to the punishing effects of white supremacy and capitalism, fatalism cannot be an option. Paulo Freire argued that hope is an ontological necessity. Not naïve hope, Freire said, but hope “anchor[ed] in practice.” “[H]ope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness.” I continue to contend, as I did in the conclusion to The New Political Economy of...


Urban Education, that the slogan “Another world is both possible and necessary” is a realistic assessment of the present situation. Clarifying the political economy and the racist roots of the present social order is an important step, so that education can be, as Warmington notes, one node in networks of democratic resistance.